

¡Zapata vive, la lucha sigue!

70 years of struggle for land and emancipation in the Tojolabal community of ejido Tabasco, Chiapas, Mexico (1930 – 1998)



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Acronyms

AHEC	Archivo Historico del Estado de Chiapas
BAC	Una Bodega, un Avion y un Camion
EZLN	Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional
BUAP	Benemerita Universidad Autonoma de Puebla
CAM	Comisión Agraria Mixta
CIOAC	Central Independiente de Organizaciones Indigenas y Campesinas
CNC	Confederacion Nacional Campesina
CNDF	Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos
CTM	Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico
DOF	Diario Oficial de la Federacion
FLN	Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional
FRAYBA	Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INEGI	Instituto Nacional de Estadistica, Geografia e Informatica
INMECAFE	Instituto Mexicano del Café
JBG	Junta de Buen Gobierno
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PAN	Partido de Acción Nacional
PRD	Partido de la Revolución Democrática
PRI	Partido Revolucionario Institucional
PRM	Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana
PSUM	Partido Socialista Unificado de Mexico
PT	Partido del Trabajo
RAN	Registro Agrario Nacional
RPP	Registro Publico de Propiedades
UiO	Universitet i Oslo
UNAM	Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México
USA	United States of America
WTO	World Trade Organization

Chapter 1: Introduction

“It was like a... refreshing, new discourse!” says Blanche Petrich, journalist in the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*. She sits in the safe environment of an office building in Mexico City and talks about the indigenous armed uprising in Chiapas of January 1994. Blanche Petrich wears jewellery and a smart dress. She seems very middle class. And she is far away from the actual conflict.¹ (See map 1.1)

In a way, the quote above could have been mine. Upon arriving in Mexico in January 2006 I guess I fitted the scheme of the naïve European revolutionary tourist.² I was hoping to find traces of the revolution that took place “to make the Revolution possible”³, and I wanted to write my master thesis on the way the Zapatista movement had been, and still was, paving the way for a new Mexico, and, in consequence, for a new way of thinking about political change and revolution. For me, too, the indigenous cry of *Basta!* – Enough!⁴ – represented a “refreshing, new discourse”.

Given the political situation in Mexico in 1994, when the movement that was to be known as the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional* (EZLN) – The Zapatista Army for National Liberation – declared war on the Mexican government, Blanche Petrich’s motives are understandable. In 1994, the PRI (*Partido Revolucionario Institucional* – The Institutional Revolutionary Party) one-party rule in Mexico was still going strong after some 70 years in power, the wounds were still fresh after the *Guerra Sucia*⁵ – the Dirty War – against left wingers in the 1970s, and the indigenous peoples of Mexico were forgotten in the national debate, if not subject to straight forward racism.⁶ Petrich sums up a general feeling in large sectors of Mexican society about the Zapatista uprising: Finally somebody spoke out against government repression, dictatorship and poverty.

But still... The distance, both geographically and culturally, between the offices of *La Jornada* in *La Colonia del Valle* in the capital of Mexico and the southernmost state of Chiapas could hardly have been greater. And Blanche Petrich, I was to find out during a one and a half year long stay in Mexico, exemplifies some important aspects of the national debate on *Zapatismo* – which is the common way of denominating the (neo-)

¹ In *La Jornada* & *Canalseisdejulio* 2003

² Viqueira 2001

³ Subcomandante Marcos, quoted in Blixen and Fazio 1995

⁴ In the document *Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona*, read by the Zapatista insurgents from the town hall of San Cristobal de Las Casas on January 1, 1994 and published in newspapers, EZLN claims to be the result of 500 years of repression. “But today we say enough!” is one of the more famous quotes from the document. (EZLN 2003)

⁵ This name has been applied to the state repression against leftist activists in Mexico in the late 1960s and the -70s. In Montemayor 2004

⁶ Gomez Izquierdo 2005

Zapatista movement:⁷ Most commentators live their lives far away from the region of fighting, and they speak about, and sometimes for, the indigenous peoples that rose up in arms in Chiapas, but rarely talk to the indigenous or ask them why?, how? and now what?

What struck me when researching and reading the existing literature on EZLN, was that surprisingly little existed about the facts on the ground, about how the living and breathing grassroots of the Zapatista movement had experienced their participation in the uprising, and about why they chose to go to such an extreme measure as declaring war on the national government. Or, that is: Many scientists and journalists and activists had a lot to say on the subject, but what caught my attention was the lack of indigenous voices telling their stories, explaining their choices. The majority of all the words, articles and books produced on and about Zapatismo were written by Hispanic city intellectuals, and more often than not focused on abstract, political aspects of the phenomenon rather than on serious historical investigations about the background of EZLN.⁸ Blanche Petrich was not alone! She was part of a broad political wave that historian Juan Pedro Viqueira calls the *chiapanólogos* – politically orientated intellectuals who know little but talk much about the history of Chiapas and the reasons for the uprising in 1994.⁹

This thesis is a modest attempt, within the limits of a master thesis and a student's ability to really understand Mexican history, to answer some key questions about the Zapatista movement and its relationship with its base – the indigenous people of Chiapas. For this purpose, I give an account of the history of a small Chiapan Community called ejido Tabasco, located in the municipality of Las Margaritas. I follow the *Tabasqueños* – the people of ejido Tabasco — from the creation of the community in 1939 to the end of the 1990s. My hope is that this enables me to study a historical process that, to some degree, has been left out of much of the academic work done in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising.

Before I go into the theoretical approach of this master thesis and the study of ejido Tabasco, I would like to discuss some of the literature on Zapatismo. This I do to show how I ended up studying a small Chiapan community. My initial thinking about researching and writing about the Zapatista movement was changed when confronted with

⁷ I use zapatista instead of neo-zapatista when referring to EZLN and the politics of the movement. To quote one of the heavyweights in Chiapan history, Antonio Garcia de Leon: *The term "Zapatismo" is here used on purpose, since it is the name the rebels give to their movement, considering it a continuation of "original Zapatismo" of 1910-19. This is important because today those who are outsiders or opponents of the movement usually call it "neo-zapatismo."* (Garcia de Leon 2005)

⁸ This will be discussed in greater detail as this chapter rolls on, in the discussion about literature.

⁹ Viqueira 1999. One note: I know very little about Blanche Petrich, about her background and knowledge about Zapatismo and Chiapas. I only use her as a kind of straw man in this introduction.

a gigantic body of literature, at times more polemic than academic in its approach. Planning on writing about EZLN before going to Mexico, it all seemed clear: The Zapatista struggle was a fair and necessary one, and had to be analyzed in the context of its contribution to the thinking about contentious politics. Upon arriving in Mexico, the image got blurred – EZLN is disputed, also among scholars, as I will show in the following. And, more important in this context: So many words, articles and books – of differing quality – are written about Zapatismo, often in a hyperbolic fashion, that my looking for a small indigenous community was a kind of escape from it all. This does not mean I did not read and enjoy – and use – the existing literature. I have. But I hope these next pages will cast some light on why this thesis ended up as it did.

Towards the end of this chapter I will discuss the thesis of this work, and give a summary of the structure of this paper.

The frustrations of a student facing history – a discussion about literature

This discussion on the existing literature about Zapatismo is caused by the frustration of this student when confronted with what scholars actually have written about the uprising in Chiapas in 1994. After having read much of what has been written on the topic, my impression is that there hardly exists any neutral books or articles. This has made the handling and election of which secondary sources to use in the process of writing this thesis a difficult one.

It can be repeated: A lot has been written about EZLN. According to Octavio Gordillo y Ortiz, who has gathered much of the literature about Zapatismo, there are more than 700 research publications, books, articles and NGO reports out there on the topic.¹⁰ In other words: The bibliography on Zapatismo is impressive in its amount. After having read some 70 books – most of which are recognized as the “classics” in this field of study – and having tried to avoid the most politicized approaches, I need to ask: But what about the quality of this massive body of literature? And the political tendentious speculations?

Juan Pedro Viqueira, historian at *el Colegio de Mexico*, whose work focuses since many decades back on Chiapas, claims that most of what is written about EZLN and Chiapas since January 1994 are folders of propaganda rather than academic works.¹¹ In Viqueira’s

¹⁰ Gordillo y Ortiz 2006. I have not found all the books I know of in Gordillo y Ortiz’ collection, which shows, of course, that there are many more publications than that, even.

¹¹ Viqueira 1999

view, the problem is the improvised “chiapanólogos” buying into the scheme of the Zapatistas and the diocese of San Cristobal.¹²

In this interpretation, we have some voracious, exploiting *finqueros*¹³ who enjoy the abundant richness generated in the region and who throw the Indians off their ancestral lands with the help of their white guards and the repressive forces of the government.¹⁴

On the other hand, says Viqueira, we have the good Indian; he who kept his culture alive during 500 years of repression; a democratic man living in harmony with nature – not so far away from the old anthropological notion of the “noble savage”.

I tend to agree with Viqueira. Several scholars who write about EZLN team with the guerrilla and try to evade all the darker sides of it or – not mentioned by Viqueira – they criticize the Zapatistas and defend the government or the official policy with immensity. Neither side prioritizes accurate, historical accounts of what happened in Chiapas and Mexico leading up to 1994 and the Zapatista uprising. To give but a few examples:

Spanish writer Manuel Vázquez Montalban writes in his personal account of meeting with subcomandante Marcos in the Lacandon jungle about the ignorance of the Mexican right, blaming the government for all the sorrows of the poor. He makes no intention of hiding how impressed he is with the political project of EZLN, a project he considers to be fair and necessary and driven by the indigenous population and an internal democracy that is missing in official, public Mexico. This is not necessarily wrong, but whereas Montalban analyzes the sorrows of western modernity with clarity, he does not apply the same standard when discussing Zapatismo. Instead he discusses literature, fine arts and the movies with Marcos, and is clearly impressed with the guerrilla leader’s knowledge and wit. He goes on to present the subcomandante as a city intellectual, a joker and a mystical figure that joined forces with the suppressed to make the revolution possible. This is the image the Zapatistas want to sell, and have succeeded in selling to the European intellectuals. Equally typical of the European approach is the understanding of the indigenous project – without making a serious effort to find out for one self what this project really is. Montalban’s description of living in the Zapatista community with other “revolutionary tourists” from Europe, showing how impressed he is with them, seems

¹² The diocese of San Cristobal shares many of the Zapatista interpretations of Chiapas’ socio-economic structures, as we will see in chapter 5 and forth.

¹³ A *finquero* is the owner of the *finca*, which in Chiapas is the common name for *hacienda*; farm

¹⁴ In Viqueira 1999

rather emblematic: This is first and foremost the account of how the Zapatistas came to be the favourite of the European left in the post Berlin wall 1990s.¹⁵

Scottish Sociologist John Holloway, working in the Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP), Mexico since the early 1990s, is the editor of an anthology that represents another tendency in the literature on Zapatismo – that of (over-)analyzing the politics of Zapatismo. *Zapata vive! Reinventing revolution in Mexico* is interesting in its take on the politics of the Zapatista struggle, about the newness of Zapatista politics and the movements use of post-modern symbolism etc.¹⁶ The scholars contributing in this anthology, ranging from economists to anthropologists, discuss some important issues, such as whether EZLN is a post- or anti-modern movement. The tendency is that EZLN is not anti-modern, but rather that the movement is driven by resistance to the only modernity acceptable in the world after *The End of History*, as pronounced by US-American historian Francis Fukuyama after the fall of the Soviet block in the early 1990s.¹⁷ The book launches EZLN as the solution to the political impotence of the left after the fall of the Berlin wall, and concludes that the only viable way for a left revolution today is that of the Zapatista *preguntando caminamos* – we walk asking, meaning that the revolution be created along the way, that nobody holds all the answers.¹⁸ To counter this view: Mexican literature professor Juan Lopez Pellicer at the University in Oslo claims that EZLN is an anti-modern movement, struggling to revoke some of the unfortunate aspects of western civilization and returning to a more innocent way of life, in peace with nature.¹⁹

The two positions represent two radically different views if put in perspective: In the former, the Zapatista may pave the way for worldwide change. The latter seems to reduce the Zapatista project to the local sphere of Chiapas. Most of the literature seems to argue that the first take is truer than the latter – EZLN is all about an indigenous rebellion, but not solely that. Zapatismo is not limited to Chiapas. This is also in accordance with EZLN's own approach – they are not comfortable with being just a spokesman for indigenous emancipation, they seek more profound change.²⁰

Mexican economist Luis Lorenzano claims that the Zapatista rebellion is based on an agrarian community organized as an urban worker's commune. This commune is the

¹⁵ Montalban 1998

¹⁶ Holloway & Pelaez 1998

¹⁷ Fukuyama claims in his essay *The end of History and the New Man* that the battle of ideologies came to an end with the end of Soviet communism. Now, says Fukuyama, we live in the Global world, intertwined by liberal capitalism. (Fukuyama 1992)

¹⁸ Holloway 1998

¹⁹ Pellicer (unpublished)

²⁰ Le Bot 1997

material base of the armed community (but also part of this armed community), and their worker's federation is EZLN. In continuation, this means that Zapatismo is not based on ethnicity, but rather is a class rebellion.²¹ This argument is somewhat refined by John Holloway in the book *Change the World without taking power*.²² Holloway says the Zapatistas are right in not trying to overthrow the Mexican government and take power. The state is embedded in a network of power relations, and, thus, the world cannot be changed by taking over state power. The central point is that negation is at the very heart of revolution – negation of capitalistic structures and state power, and that EZLN is the hitherto most representative of this way of thinking about politics. Holloway's claim that in the beginning of the revolution there is the scream, a spontaneous, deepfelt protest, is a reference to the Zapatista yell of Basta!, of the Zapatista negation of this world.²³

These perspectives are interesting, but not really helpful to a student of history. Many of the theories seem to be taken out of thin air – Zapatismo is adapted to the theory rather than the other way around. None of the above mentioned authors claim to describe the origins of Zapatismo. But neither do they seem to emphasize the understanding of the historical roots. And what happens to Holloway's theory if the historical roots of EZLN are not about the primal, intuitive scream of Basta!, but rather the work of traditional socialist revolutionaries? Will all his efforts of explaining the Zapatista “newness” then be in vain? And is that maybe why discussions of the origins of Zapatismo does not enter the equation in the openly left leaning works on the subject? For as we will see, EZLN does not represent anything new in political thinking upon settling in Chiapas. At that point the organization rather is a traditional leftist guerrilla, aiming at overthrowing the government.

Subcomandante Marcos, portrayed as the new thinker of the left, admits for the first time that EZLN holds its origins in the traditional, political-military movement *Las Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional* (FLN) – the Forces for National Liberation in 1997.²⁴ He states this in an interview with French anthropologist Yvon Le Bot in the book *El sueño zapatista*, one of the rather few attempts of writing an accurate and complete account of the movement by some one who has actually been granted an interview with the

²¹ Lorenzano 1998

²² Holloway 2002

²³ Holloway 2002

²⁴ FLN was a national political-military organization that sprang out of the Mexican 1968 movement. They worked with both peasant and rural workers, capacitating their members in preparations for revolution. The leadership consisted of mostly young students. More on this in chapter 7. EZLN's origin in FLN is not controversial today (see for instance subcomandante Marcos' letter to comandante German in footnote 102), but this fact is still somehow silenced by many of the Zapatista supporters and their work.

subcomandante and who sympathizes with EZLN.²⁵ But even with the knowledge of this background, many scholars keep trying to forget it is so, or they try to minimize this historical past of EZLN. Hector Diaz-Polanco and Consuela Sanchez, authors of the book *Mexico Diverso*, talk about the origins of what we today know as EZLN and how it differs from the traditional guerrilla movement in Latin America. “Even though, in its early days, EZLN held similar positions [as these movements], these were changed rather fast.” That is the sum total of the discussion on the origins of Zapatismo – what may seem problematic for the authors thesis and that of the Zapatista supporters, is brushed off as something that “changed rather fast”. The rest of the chapter in question is devoted to a discussion on all the new ways of making politics that are instigated by the Zapatistas.²⁶

Also, on a little bit different note, it is worth mentioning the work of Carlos Lenkersdorf. Having lived and worked in the Tojolabal region for many years, this German anthropologist became a professor at the *Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico* – the National Autonomous University of Mexico – (UNAM) in Mexico City. He has written extensively on the Tojolabales, also in connection with the Zapatista uprising. For my taste, Lenkersdorf leans too much towards the “noble savage” in his work. He blames the problems in the indigenous communities solely on the arrival of the Spanish, and thus gives strength to the myth of the spiritual Indian, never harming nature etcetc – with titles such as *Filosofar en clave Tojolabal* and *Los hombres verdaderos*.²⁷ Needless to say: Lenkersdorf is the house anthropologist of many an academic apologists of EZLN.²⁸

Also among those who oppose EZLN, many of the works lack academic groundwork and / or are very polemical in the way they treat the movement as a subject of study. One example of this tendency: In his essay *Los zapatistas y el arte de la ventriloquia*, Mexican anthropologist Pedro Pitarch writes:

[...] I am positive that el Subcomandante Marcos has not renounced his conventional communist ideas, notwithstanding his public and ironic distance to those ideas. In his discourse – not so much in his communiqués – it is not hard to find small signs and hints.²⁹

This quote from an essay written in a polemical fashion more than an accurate one, is but an example of the many attacks from the “right” on the Zapatista movement; It does

²⁵ Le Bot 1997

²⁶ Diaz-Polanco & Sanchez 2002. The authors are referring to the EZLN roots in FLN. Having said this: This is not really a book about the origins of Zapatismo, nor is it an account of the historical reasons for Zapatismo. As the title of the book indicates, it discusses questions on autonomy, based in parts on the Zapatista experience.

²⁷ The book titles are telling enough: *Philosophize in the Tojolabal key* and *The true men*.

²⁸ Having said this: Lenkersdorf has done great work in Chiapas, both human and academic. My critique is not at all written with the intention of diminishing his efforts.

²⁹ Pitarch 2003

note really provide any proves or relevant sources or quotes. Another example of the same tendency is the book *Marcos: La genial impostura*, by European journalists Bertrand de la Grange & Maite Rico. The two want to look at the darker aspects of EZLN, but end up attacking Marcos more than anything, leaving the reader with an impression that they got mad because he did not give them an interview.

In left-centre historian and journalist Carlos Tello Diaz' book *La Rebelion de las Cañadas*, the approach is also a critical one. In the latest edition, he gets his sources straight, but when the book was first published in 1996, it contained mistakes, misinterpretations and even false claims. It is known that this book was written under the influence of Mexican intelligence sources, which provided Tello Diaz with inside information, but also with pro-government propaganda.³⁰ That being said, the book probably is, in its newest edition, the most complete and accurate account of the origins of Zapatismo in Chiapas, maybe alongside sociologist Carmen Legorreta's *Religion, politica y guerilla en Las Cañadas de la Selva Lacandona*.³¹ This first hand account of events in Chiapas in the late 1980s and early -90s has been criticised for its critical approach to EZLN and almost silenced by supporters of the movement. This, of course, may be proof that Viqueira is right in his pessimistic view on the scholars of Zapatismo.

Overall, there are more books written from a "left" perspective on the Zapatistas, thus the danger of ending up with purely positive sources, lacking in historical perspective, is a real one for students of the movement. The main focus of the left leaning scholars in Mexico (and in the world as such) when writing on the Zapatismo is the "newness" of the Zapatista movement. They read the poetic language of subcomandante Marcos about how the EZLN is only asking for "Dignity and Justice for the indigenous population of Mexico", and they interpret all the different documents, comunicués and declarations from the subcomandante's hand. And they find what they look for. Slogans such as "It is like going to a school that has yet to be built"³² and "Everything for everybody, nothing for us",³³ "A revolution to make the Revolution possible"³⁴ to name but a few have resonated among Mexican (and international) scholars and students.³⁵ They have been interpreted as

³⁰ Flores 2004. According to Genoveva Flores, a lot of writers were offered this information from the Mexican government. Tello Diaz was the only one who accepted the offer.

³¹ Legorreta 1998. Legorreta is a sociologist in UNAM and former activist in indigenous Chiapas.

³² Le Bot 1997

³³ EZLN 2001

³⁴ Subcomandante Marcos, quoted in Blixen and Fazio 1995. The capital R is Marcos' own – he speaks of the small revolution (taking place in Chiapas) that will prepare the scene for the big one.

³⁵ One thing are all the communications (EZLN 2003). Marcos has also shown his poetic and playful side in his writings. Some of the best examples are his conversations with the old Antonio about how he has learned from the indigenous (Subcomandante Marcos 1998) and the travels around the world in his short stories

meaning such different things as leaving the old left behind to create a new one³⁶, Marcos' opposition to theory and the Zapatistas creating something truly new.³⁷

That scholars are concerned with those topics is fine. But when asked by this student where the Zapatistas bought their weapons, for instance, none of the scholars I spoke to, who had been working on the Zapatismo for years, could give me an answer. "I have never even thought about that", one of them told me.³⁸

Of course there exists literature – by scholars, journalists, NGOs – that really tries to accurately describe and discuss the historic events in Chiapas. Two rather recent works in this category should be mentioned: Dutch anthropologist Gemma van der Haar's study of the community of ejido San Miguel Chibtik is an account of how Zapatismo has changed life in the community and the Tojolabal region of Chiapas. She offers a serious historic account of the 20th century in the community and of land reform in Chiapas.³⁹ Mexican sociologist Marco Antonio Estrada Saavedra in el Colegio de Mexico published his book *La comunidad armada rebelde y el EZLN* in May 2007. This book is an account of the 20th century in Tojolabal Chiapas, offering a good, balanced historical analysis. The description of the social and military structures of EZLN is detailed and good, and offers new, source-based knowledge of the origins of Zapatismo as well as of present day Chiapas.⁴⁰

I could go on mentioning good academic work, such as left-leaning (and ex-zapatista advisor) historian Antonio Garcia de Leon's historical work⁴¹, that of the afore-mentioned Juan Pedro Viqueira⁴², anthropologist Mario Humberto Ruz⁴³, of US sociologist Jan Rus⁴⁴ and other. But these scholars and journalists tend not to be taken seriously – or to be silenced – by the "chiapanólogos". The tendency to leave out critical voices is, to some extent, understandable when one considers that the Zapatista movement is still active and still divides Mexican society, academic as popular. This becomes clear in Genoveva Flores' book *La seducción de Marcos a la Prensa*, that deals with the first ten books published about Zapatismo. Flores shows how the viewpoint of the writers differs, and how

about Don Durito de la Selva Lacandona, the worlds most politically aware and anti neo-liberal beetle (Subcomandante Marcos 2005). These short stories combine political analysis, humour and poetic descriptions.

³⁶ Holloway 1998

³⁷ For instance Holloway 1998

³⁸ From economists to historians, including most academic disciplines in social sciences and humanities. I do not wish to mention any names here.

³⁹ van der Haar 2001

⁴⁰ Estrada Saavedra 2007

⁴¹ For instance Garcia de Leon 1997, 2002, and 2005

⁴² Like Viqueira 1999, 2001, and 2002

⁴³ For instance his four volume anthology about the Tojolabales, Humberto Ruz 1981-1986

⁴⁴ Who has written extensively on indigenous Chiapas, mainly on the highland around San Cristobal de Las Casas. See Rus 1994, and 2005

this shows in their use of sources.⁴⁵ The same tendency, although concerning journalism, is obvious in the three books containing a complete collection of newspaper articles about Zapatismo from 1994 to 1998 in the series *Chiapas para la historia*.⁴⁶

The reasons for this abundance of polemical literature may be possible to explain, but it does not help move the understanding of the Zapatista project forward. All of the above caused me to rethink my project. To be able to look beyond this wall of facts and opinion, I would have to look for my own primary sources. Through that, I hope to be able to go beyond some of the weaknesses of the literature that I have tried to discuss in this section.

But then one may object: Where do I stand? If all the fine scholars discussed above lose the overview when writing about Zapatismo, why won't I, a mere master student, do the same? This will be discussed in the following chapter.

Reaching a definition: What am I looking to solve?

Based on literature discussed above, we can say that two main positions can be identified among scholars writing on the reasons for the Zapatista uprising:

1. The indigenous population had been subdued for too long a time; state and local *ladino*⁴⁷ – Hispanic – repression and the lack of land reform had paved the way for this rebellion. It was, hence, just a matter of organizing the necessary revolution.⁴⁸
2. Intellectual ladino revolutionaries from the city saw a political opening in Chiapas, and went there to prepare a Marxist revolution, cynically using the local population as a mere tool to reach their goal.⁴⁹

Of course I am over-simplifying, but the two factions mentioned above dominate the general picture. My claim is that both of them are wrong.

My thesis is that the Zapatista uprising is only one of many events in a historical process of indigenous struggle for land and emancipation, in a world structured and organized by a Spanish elite during Spanish colonial times⁵⁰ and its descendents in independent Mexico. Thus, EZLN is but a phase in a struggle against the power

⁴⁵ Flores 2004

⁴⁶ Diaz Arciniega & Lopez Tellez 1997

⁴⁷ Frequently used in Mexico to separate Spanish descendents from the indigenous peoples. In Chiapas, the term *caxlan*, bearing the same meaning, is used as frequent, if not more.

⁴⁸ This view can be found in González Esponda & Pólito Barrios 1994, in an essay called *Notes to understand the origins of the Zapatista uprising*. The essay focuses solely on the material situation and suppressed indigenous peoples.

⁴⁹ A good example would be the above quoted essay *Los zapatistas y el arte de la ventriloquia*, by Pedro Pitarch. (Pitarch 2003)

⁵⁰ When Mexico was a viceroyalty under Spain. The Spanish arrived in Mexico in 1520, and were thrown out some 300 years later. (Escalante Gonzalbo, et. al 2005)

structures imposed on the indigenous with the arrival of the Spanish and the inclusion of Latin America in the European sphere of influence.

I will try to show that the Zapatista uprising is the result of the indigenous struggle to find a place in modern Mexico in the 20th century, a process that was taken on by the very government EZLN was to attack in 1994. Some background for that claim: In the aftermath of the Mexican revolution, a ten year long civil war that started in 1910 and ended with the formal imposition of democracy in Mexico, the country started a process of modernization, a process in which also the indigenous peoples were included in the national project. The most radical phase was the Cardenista reforms in the 1930s.⁵¹

This modernization meant a qualitative change in the very structural limitations of indigenous life. They went from being villains, depending on the landlord, to collectively owning land and participating in the world market. But the government never followed this project through – it was abandoned in the following decades. **Thus, the old order was broken, but nothing really replaced it. This was the starting point of a struggle to adapt and gain ground that culminated in the Zapatista uprising in 1994.**

This struggle has roots in indigenous culture and history as well as that of the Hispanics who joined forces with the local peoples. EZLN is but one of at least three outside actors who left an important mark in indigenous Chiapas in the 20th century.

To test my thesis, I will give a historical explanation of this process of struggle.

Choosing ejido Tabasco and some remarks on the structure of this thesis

In order to explain this historical struggle for land and emancipation, I have chosen to tell the story of people who participated in the Zapatista movement and in the chain of historic events discussed in passing above. Knowing that the Zapatistas intend to control the flow of information to the outside world I decided to look for an ex-zapatista community.⁵² I

⁵¹ President Lazaro Cardenas (1934 - 1940) annexed the lands of big landowners and redistributed them to the peasant population. This implied that the indigenous agricultural workers who formerly had been working in villain-like conditions on big farms were enabled to own the lands they were working, thus attaching them to the world market as producers. This process of profound, structural change will be discussed in chapter 4.

⁵² Finding a community with Zapatista experience proved difficult. The Zapatistas are, since 2003, organized in what they call *Caracoles* – Escargots. The Caracoles house the *Junta de Buen Gobierno* (JBG) – the Board of the Good Government, of which there are five. The JBGs control the access to the Zapatista communities. Once inside, they will follow you around to make sure your questions are appropriate. There are also limitations as to the topic of conservation. I thus chose to look for an ex-Zapatista community. Even if I had wanted to go a Zapatista community, it would have been difficult: In May 2006, repression of civil unrest in San Salvador Atenco close to Mexico City made the Zapatistas declare *red alert*, making entrance to Zapatista communities even harder. At that time, the presidential election campaign was in its final stages, and subcomandante Marcos was travelling Mexico on a tour called *La Otra campaña* – an alternative campaign for people ”on the bottom, to the left” (EZLN 2005). The group crushed by the police in Atenco were supporters of *La Otra*. Thus, Marcos cancelled *La otra* and declared red alert.

found this society in ejido Tabasco in the region of Las Margaritas, Chiapas. This community offered the opportunity I was looking for – a chance to ask questions to real people about their participation in EZLN, in a region where both primary and secondary sources are scant, but available. I will in the following chapters tell the history of ejido Tabasco from the late 1930s towards the end of the last century. I focus on four historical phases in this struggle, all of which have their own main chapter in this thesis:

Chapter 4. The Cardenista land reform, during which the villagers get formal freedom and collective communal ownership of the lands they work. This was a process of restructuring rural, indigenous societies in Mexico in the 1930s. I will show how this process changed the structures, and how the project was abandoned in the following decades, leaving a void that could be filled by other actors.

Chapter 5. The role played by the Catholic Church and the liberation theology in indigenous Chiapas from the mid-1960s, filling the void described in chapter 4. Through this encounter, the indigenous get formal training (reading, writing, first aid, law, the bible). This is the starting point of a process of capacitating rural, indigenous Chiapas.

Chapter 6. The leftist movements and the focus on social and political organization in the 1970s and -80s, creating inter-communal organization in rural Chiapas and thus an indigenous identity. Here I will also show how structures are created that EZLN could take advantage of upon arriving in Chiapas.

Chapter 7. The rise of the Zapatista movement in Chiapas and the role this movement was to play in ejido Tabasco until the villagers decided to leave the movement in the late 1990s. We will see how EZLN differs from other actors present, but also at the many shared features and the shared goals.

I will try to place ejido Tabasco in a broader context, telling at the same time the story of the municipality of Las Margaritas, and of Chiapas and Mexico. It is necessary to include a brief summary of Tojolabal history in the region to get the historical context right. This I will do in **chapter 3**, where I also will describe, in brief, life on the finca as experienced by the *Tabasqueños* – the people in ejido Tabasco.

EZLN is a social movement, with historical roots. Therefore, I will try to contextualize EZLN using theories on social movements. These theories will be discussed in the **chapter 2**, together with a discussion of methodology and sources.

This thesis is basically the written history of ejido Tabasco, a small indigenous community in the municipality of Las Margaritas, Chiapas. Ejido Tabasco is situated in the Tojolabal heartland of Chiapas, and thus consists of solely people from the Tojolabal

ethnicity. The Tojolabales are one of the four most important ethnicities that make up the EZLN.⁵³ In the chapter 8, the concluding pages of this thesis I will discuss whether studying a small Tojolabal community really offers any answers about the Zapatista project as a whole. I hope it does. My hope is that this thesis will cast some light on the origins of EZLN, the guerrilla movement that reached international fame when it declared war on the Mexican government January 1. 1994.

⁵³ The others are Tzotziles, Tzeltales, and Choles.

Chapter 2: Theory and methodology

This thesis is a study of EZLN. Yet, more than half of it deals with other actors and a pre-EZLN Chiapas. I have chosen this approach because I want to understand the historical process(es) that led to the creation of an indigenous guerrilla movement in the periphery of Mexico. I try to give an account of historical forces enabling the creation of a guerrilla movement in Chiapas. To understand this process, I have chosen to look at EZLN as a social movement. This theory chapter is, thus, dedicated to a discussion about different theories on such movements. In section two of this chapter, I deal with the methodology.

Theory

What defines a social movement?

In this, I follow Sidney Tarrow in his work *Power in Movement*, where he says about social movements that they are created by people or groups in a mutual confrontation with collective challenges. In order to achieve their common goals, such movements are based on solidarity, in interaction with elites, opponents and authorities or governments.⁵⁴

The social movements that we know today emerged with the creation of the modern national state and capitalism in the western world – in short with what we may call modernity. I will discuss this later on if Mexico can be said to participate in the same processes of modernization as European countries, the USA or other British colonies.

With the creation of modernity in the western world, new battlefields were created. Following Norwegian social scientist Stein Rokkan, these battlefields are, among others: The conflict between centre and periphery, between urban and rural areas, conflicts over religion, and, with the consolidation of the capitalist economy, between labour and capital.⁵⁵ Also, with the creation of a central government, the very infrastructure of the state (physical as well as institutional) and the concentration of power make rebellion against a clearly defined enemy – the central government – and group solidarity across geographical divides possible. Thus, local, spontaneous riots, food riots due to bad harvest etc, will not fall within the definition of social movements.

Therefore, a clear distinction between modern social movements and pre-capitalist, historic movement can be found. According to Norwegian historian Knut Kjeldstadli, we can say that what separates the internal dynamics of the modern form of social movements from the older ones, is, in its ideal type:

⁵⁴ Tarrow 1998

⁵⁵ Rokkan 1970

1. The permanent character; these are not ad hoc-movements created to confront an emerging problem of short duration (again, food riots may serve as an example).
2. The ability to move the masses; the mass character. Such movements are popular movements, and have democratic structures.
3. Strict internal organizational structures, but the movement is not limited to impose its goals on the members of the organization.
4. Modern social movements have clearly defined goals, such as the changing of power structures or the imposition of abstinence in society as a whole.
5. A collective identity due to taking part in this movement, an identity that separates them from the outside world.
6. Modern social movements are ridden by an inner paradox: They distance themselves from society and live according to other rules, standards or structures, but at the same time want to change the very society they choose not to be part of.⁵⁶

How do social movements see the light of day?

This is one of the most important questions in the study of social movements. How come such movements emerge in one historical setting, while in other times, characterized by what might even seem more favourable conditions, nothing happens?⁵⁷ Different political thinkers have come up with different answers to this question. I will briefly discuss some of these theories here, hoping that this helps understanding the processes working for and against the creation of such movements.

The traditional theories⁵⁸

Karl Marx claims, in accordance with the *teleological*⁵⁹ take on history, that the objective factors, such as ownership to the means of production and the structures of power, will create the conditions that make social movements and social upheaval possible and, even, necessary.⁶⁰ While Marx himself clearly states that man creates his own history⁶¹, some of

⁵⁶ Kjeldstadli 2002, p 37

⁵⁷ This will be discussed in relation to EZLN in the concluding pages of this thesis, because of the seemingly improbability of an armed uprising against a national government in a modern country in the 1990s.

⁵⁸ This short overview is based on Tarrow 1998, page 10-25. References to primary sources are mine.

⁵⁹ A teleological school of thought claims there is an inherent purpose for everything that exists. Seeing history as linear is an inherent consequent. Whether Marx subscribes to this point of view is disputed.

⁶⁰ Granted, this is a "vulgar" understanding of Marx and his theories of change (but much in accordance by the one offered by historiographer Georg G. Iggers in his *Historiography in the Twentieth Century* (Iggers 2005)). It does not consider Marx' discussion of agents of change (for instance in Marx & Engels, 1970) nor his distinction between "what is" (verhalten) and "how reality is perceived" (verhältnisse) (Op.cit.). For the purpose of this thesis, I will leave the discussion about Marx at this.

his followers tend to have a more deterministic interpretation of this teleology. If social uprising does not occur, a tendency among some Marxists is to explain this with the term of *false consciousness*⁶² – of how the suppressed people (the working class(es)) are not in a position to see their own misery, or worse: they have been “bribed” by the powerful capitalists or capitalism and consumerism.⁶³ It seems most of the “leftist” scholars writing about Zapatismo follow this interpretation of Marx in their understanding of the reasons for the uprising Zapatista. One example: “[The Chiapan] situation as political and economical subordinated territory allowed conditions of misery and marginalization so extreme that they could only manifest in a violent way.”⁶⁴ This may seem convenient enough in the aftermath of an undeniable historic fact, but it also may hide the workings of other actors than the strictly objective forces of history, and thus hardly explains what happened in Chiapas in the decades before the Zapatista uprising. That being said, these structures of power and the material reality can hardly be overlooked when trying to explain why people choose to declare war on the national government.

In trying to explain why the objective, historical forces of Marx only sometimes lead to the creation of social movements and eventually the changing of power structures and the overthrow of the governing bodies, Russian revolutionary leader and first Soviet chairman Lenin introduced to praxis and theory the *vanguard*.⁶⁵ In short, this means that the objective forces need an agent of change to help create to social movements, somebody who see the objective forces and analyze them, and trough coming up with the solution can attract people to his movement. In Lenin’s version, the Party is to be (and was) the vanguard and the spearhead of the Revolution. The most critical voices on Zapatismo seem to follow this logic: That EZLN imposed itself as the vanguard in Chiapas and somehow managed to lure the indigenous peoples into joining their project.

⁶¹ “The first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals... Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life.” (Marx & Engels, 1970, p 42)

⁶² “Ideology is a process accomplished by the so-called thinker. Consciously, it is true, but with a false consciousness. The real motive forces impelling him remain unknown to him; otherwise it simply would not be an ideological process. Hence he imagines false or apparent motives.” Friedrich Engels to Franz Mehring (in Marx & Engels 1942, p 511)

⁶³ One typical approach is that of Lenin, claiming that the British working class has been bribed by the goods of imperialism. (Lenin 1999)

⁶⁴ García de Leon 2002. It would not be fair, however, to indicate that García de Leon, in this excellent book, is blind to other processes that combined to make the Zapatista uprising possible.

⁶⁵ From Lenin’s work *What is to be done*: “Social-democratic consciousness... would have to be brought to [the workers] from without. The history of all countries shows that the working class, exclusively by its own effort is able to develop only trade-union consciousness... The theory of socialism, however, grew out of the philosophic, historical, and economic theories elaborated by educated representatives of the propertied classes, by intellectuals.” (Lenin & Christman 1987, p 74)

Another dominating theory on social movements is that of Italian Marxist political thinker Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci uses the term hegemony to explain the power structures, i.e. that the people's worldview is limited by the discourse that is imposed on society. Gramsci claims that the ruling classes have managed to get the whole of society to accept their interpretation of the world. Thus, the subdued see the world through the categories of their rulers, internalizing their norms.⁶⁶ Yet, there is resistance. Gramsci introduces the two terms common sense and good sense as two antitheses. Common sense is what is generally agreed upon (or imposed) in society, and establishes a set of rules and conceptions that work in favour of the hegemonial power structure.⁶⁷ Good sense, on the other hand, is "a conception that manifests itself in action,"⁶⁸ as the negation of the hegemony and direct conflict with the latter.⁶⁹ The working class is the carrier of this good sense, that emerges in extraordinary political times.⁷⁰ According to Gramsci, the working class can fight the hegemony of bourgeois culture through good sense. In short: to redefine the world according to its way of thinking, the working class (or the agent of change) must fight the cultural structures that stand in the way of the realization of the change.⁷¹

Peasant movements

Seeing as the subjects in this thesis are the indigenous peoples of rural Chiapas, I also would like to include some brief remarks on peasant movements. According to anthropologist Eric Wolf, peasants "often harbor a deep sense of injustice, but this sense of injustice must be given shape and expression in organization before it can become active on the political scene."⁷² Wolf goes on to suggest that peasant rebellion is facilitated in situations where the peasants no longer can rely on the traditional institutional context, and alternative institutions are either "too chaotic or too restrictive to guarantee a viable commitment to new ways."⁷³ Wolf also claims that the transition to capitalism or at least attachment to world markets and thus a new logic of economic thinking is the most radical

⁶⁶ Kjeldstadli 1991

⁶⁷ Like popular support for repression of a demonstration, because "the radicals deserve it", notwithstanding that the demonstrators could be fighting for a "common" good such as fair payment for workers. This reaction lends support to the government's monopoly on violence, and hence confirms state hegemony.

⁶⁸ Gramsci, quoted in Ytterstad 2004

⁶⁹ "[One should develop] a conception of necessity which gives a conscious direction to one's activity. This is the healthy nucleus that exists in "common sense", the part of it which may be called "good sense" and which deserve to be made more unitary and coherent." (Gramsci, quoted in Ytterstad 2004)

⁷⁰ Accumulated good sense also seems a possibility, but who is then to be the carrier of this accumulated thought? The vanguard? There is no room for that discussion here, however.

⁷¹ Ytterstad 2004

⁷² Wolf 1969, p xvii

⁷³ Op.cit., p xix

stage in peasant areas known in the 20th century, but that this move is necessary for a stable country: If the periphery is dominated by the past (traditions) and other regions are in the grip of the future, a country may have a waiting disaster in its hands.⁷⁴

Modern thought on social movements

The theories mentioned above are found in most “new” thinking on social movements and change as well. The *sociological approach* of the 1960s focused on structures and grievances suffered due to these structures, not only on class struggle. The approach still emphasised the Marxist approach, where the objective, outer reality is the most important one. Another theory in vogue in modern times has been that of American economist Mancur Olson claiming that people join social movements after having analyzed, rationally, the different options – thus a theory along the line of the rational, economic man.⁷⁵ This theory focuses on the individual, both the ones who join as members and on the leaders, who have to be charismatic and make others join their project because of incentives – in their function as vanguard. In this theory, many will join as not-so-motivated free passengers, soon to abandon ship if achieving their goals or if the project seems doomed.⁷⁶

Lastly, the cultural approach, the one that bears resemblance to the ideas of Gramsci, focuses on an extra-material reality, where the battlefield is the meaning of symbols and words.⁷⁷ One example from Chiapas and EZLN may be the use of Emiliano Zapata, the revolutionary general. The government used Zapata in their official rhetoric of the institutionalized revolution. This stopped when the very same government was attacked by a movement calling themselves Zapatistas, claiming they were taking back a symbol that belonged to the people.⁷⁸ This could be called “framing”⁷⁹ – a struggle over identity, of who can define his goals as being good for the most people – through the use of symbols.

It is possible to see these three as mutually working together, that its totality gives an accurate understanding of the processes at work when social movements are created. It is, however, somewhat difficult to see how Mancur Olson’s theory about the rational,

⁷⁴ Op.cit., pp 278-285

⁷⁵ Olson 1997

⁷⁶ Historian Knut Kjeldstadli gives this description of this theory: It assumes free human being with clear goals and intention of achieving them. All actions are intentional, that humans choose and make rational choices, that they have full information about their situation. Humans look for personal benefit, and go at it at maximum speed. (Kjeldstadli 1996). Kjeldstadli explicitly uses the theory as a straw man, but seems to be rather spot on.

⁷⁷ Giugni 2001

⁷⁸ Rajchenberg & Heau-Lambert 1998

⁷⁹ Tarrow, McAdam & Tilly 2001

economic man can be used in the Chiapan setting, with semi-literate people struggling for their place in society. Can these indigenous protagonists have all the information required to make absolutely conscious choices? Just a brief mention here of a theory that counters Olson's view: French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu introduces the term *habitus*. This describes a system of internalized dispositions that intermediate between social structures and activity. These dispositions are formed by structures and regulate human activity. Thus, the choices open to this rational human being are, according to Bourdieu, limited.⁸⁰ I will still, though, try to keep all the mentioned theories in mind in this thesis, and come back to these theories in the conclusion chapter.

Conjunctures of emergence of social movements

In the context of the national state in modernized western countries, scholars operate with three historical conjunctures for the emergence of social movements:

1. The transition to modernity. The conflicts generated by the sudden migration to cities and in the wake of enlightenment were typically those of rural versus urban areas, centre and periphery, and conflict over religion. In Chiapas, as we will see, this integration began in the 1930s, and is somehow distinct from the features described above.

2. The classic modern period, with the creation of a strong industrial class and conflict over surplus and ownership of the means of production, globally starting in the late 1800s or early 1900s. The conflict is the emblematic one of labour and capital and that of growing peasant movements. This thesis deals with the latter, albeit in a context different from that of the classic modern period in the industrialized countries.

3. The period of post-materialism, dominated by *new social movements*.⁸¹ The people now fight over symbols and softer values than labour and capital, in what has called been called the "silent revolution".⁸² As we have seen (in the discussion about literature), some scholars have called the Zapatista uprising the first post-modern rebellion – thus indicating it is a battle over symbols, and that EZLN is one of these new social movements.⁸³

⁸⁰ Some important features of *habitus*: Humans are formed early in life, having experienced with body and soul, in contact with other people, in actions and language. This formation is strong and slow, but can be changed by later experience. It is generated socially, but is an individual feature. Different groups in society are formed differently. In a class society, people from the same class think and act alike at some levels. This integrates the individual, and makes sure the societal structure does not fall apart. Thus, people act according to some internalized codes, depending on origin and social position. This has consequences for people's goals and dreams, it tells man what he can hope for in life. Human action thus takes part within a framework that limits it. (Kjeldstadli 1996)

⁸¹ Giugni 2001

⁸² Roland Ingelhart, quoted in Giugni 2001

⁸³ The information in this section is taken from Kjeldstadli 2002, p 42; Tarrow 1998; and Giugni 2001

Structure of possibility for the emergence of social movements

As we have seen, scholars agree that social movements as we know them emerged with the creation of the national state. According to US-American historian and political scientist Charles Tilly, social movements can only be studied in combination with political structures.⁸⁴ Thus, I will take a brief look on what is called the political structure of possibilities for the creation of social movements. Sociologist Douglas McAdam claims that the success of a social movement depends on external structures such as:

1. The degree of opening in the political system in the nation of study.
2. The stability in the power balance of the ruling elites.
3. Do possible allies in the elites exist?
4. The means available to the government and its possibilities to use these.⁸⁵

Sidney Tarrow adds to this one interesting point: Social upheavals tend to take place when the suppressed have been granted some space to exist in, but not a complete opening and full participation in society.⁸⁶ This seems to be an accurate description of indigenous Chiapas after the Cardenista reforms in the 1930s, as we will see. Thus, this theory will be discussed in the concluding pages of this thesis. We will in see how the political structures in Mexico enabled the Zapatista uprising, and to what degree the government was able to contain the rebellion once it had emerged. But before we get that far, I will discuss the context in which social movements emerge. Tarrow claims that the study of social movements has not been tried much outside the western world.⁸⁷ Do these theories, then, apply to the Mexican reality? When, if at all, did Mexico enter what we call modernity?

Mexico – a modern, western national state?

I would like to argue that such a discussion is not of great importance for this thesis.⁸⁸ My claim is that Mexico is a modern, western national state, at least politically. With the Mexican revolution, Mexico got its constitution, guarantying a secular, democratic and plural country. Granted, PRI held power for 70 years through a corporative system, where all major sectors of society (rural and labour unions and organizations, important industry,

⁸⁴ Tarrow 1998, p 18

⁸⁵ Tarrow, McAdam & Tilly 2001

⁸⁶ Tarrow 1998

⁸⁷ Op.cit. Western world defined as a zone of mutual or similar political evolution.

⁸⁸ I could claim, with Knut Kjeldstadli, that "it is worth mentioning that many phenomenon that we call modern, have roots that go at least a few centuries back in time. And traditional features still existed after the first world war." (Kjeldstadli 1995) I could also argue that the term modernity in itself is problematic, or analytically imprecise, in the words of Kjeldstadli. Does it imply eternal growth in a capitalistic economy? Secularization? (op.cit)

communications etcetc) where tied to the political project of PRI.⁸⁹ That does not disqualify from being a modern, secular state. Feudal structures did survive even the Mexican revolution. But changing these structures was the very idea behind the Cardenista reform in the 1930s, when president Lazaro Cardenas tried to reform the Mexican countryside by tightening relations between the rural communities and rest of society – modernizing and capitalizing traditional (and mostly indigenous) rural communities.⁹⁰

For the purpose of this thesis it suffices to say that Mexico started its path to modernization with the Cardenista reform in the 1930s and that the existence of institutions and a central government makes it possible to study social movements in the country.

Post-material world? What post-material world?

This does not mean that EZLN and indigenous Chiapas automatically can be seen as part of a post-material wave of social protest, for instance. The fact that many have called the Zapatista rebellion “the first post-modern rebellion”⁹¹ does not imply that the social unrest in Chiapas can be separated from the power structures and those of access to lands and means of production. One of the driving forces behind the indigenous struggle in Chiapas has been that of landownership. I thus find comfort in the words of Knut Kjeldstadli: All social movements can be understood as being sedimentary layers, where old movements and older forms of organization live alongside with newer ones. This, in my understanding, enables the use of theories on social movements on different historical stages.⁹²

Before I close this chapter, I would like to make some points about the theories on post-material social movements and the disappearance of the struggle between labour and capital. First of all, can it not be claimed, as does Craig Calhoun (in *Hvor nye er sosiale bevegelser*), that even at the height of the labour movement, the struggle was not solely that of labour and capital, a struggle over material goods?⁹³ Can it not be claimed that the focus on this one aspect of struggle was the result of a successful *framing*, of the interpretation and definition of the situation, on the part of the labour movement? With that in mind: is not possible that we fool ourselves to see more diversity than what really exists today? There are women’s movements and groups fighting for one specific ethnic group etcetc. But: western societies are still organized around capital and the central government,

⁸⁹ This will be discussed in chapter 4

⁹⁰ See Escalante Gonzalbo et.al 2005. This will be discussed in chapter 4.

⁹¹ Like for instance Holloway 1998

⁹² Kjeldstadli 2002

⁹³ Calhoun 1994

and organized in national states. Is not, hence, the struggle of labour and capital still real today, even in rich and powerful western national states? And whether Mexico is western or not, I find support in Craig Calhoun: “The affiliation to organize social movements seems to be one of the few features that connects the distinct history of western modernization to that of the new one emerging...”⁹⁴

Methodology

The research that is the basis of this thesis is a mixed one. In some parts, I rely heavily on secondary sources – books, articles, NGO reports; other parts are based on archive documents from official archives; and, finally, large parts are written on the basis of oral interviews and, to a lesser extent, anthropological observations. I have chosen – and was forced due to lack of written sources – to base much of the research in ejido Tabasco on oral sources. This means I have opened for the implicit danger of what Pierre Bourdieu calls reproducing the self-perception of the Tabasqueños rather than analysing the history of the community.⁹⁵ This, in turn, may imply reproducing the Gramscian common sense. I try to use my informants the other way around: I do not try to understand the world (Chiapas, in this case) based on the worldview of the Tojolabales. Rather, I try to explain historically processes that help create the Tabasqueño world view in different periods of time.⁹⁶ To be able to do so, I need to balance the oral sources against other material.

Combining sources of such different natures may be difficult. I will, where possible, try to use written sources as a tool of correction of the interviews. The structure of the thesis is decided by some indisputable facts: The land reforms of the 1930s and the creation of ejido Tabasco; the emergence of liberation theology in the region of study in the 1960s; the arrival of outside political activists in the 1970s; and, finally, the creation of EZLN and the armed uprising that followed. These events I find support for in archives and the literature. In that sense, it would also be possible to say that I mix my sources the other way around: That my interviews serve as a correction to the other material. When I find it necessary, I will discuss the different sources and this balance in footnotes throughout this thesis.

⁹⁴ Op.cit., p 40

⁹⁵ Kjeldstadli 1996

⁹⁶ I follow Knut Kjeldstadli when he says that the researcher wants to “explore how the big history enters the small history, how society intervenes in the individual biography”. (Kjeldstadli 1996, p 17)

Archives

I have used the *Registro Agrario Nacional* (RAN)⁹⁷ in Tuxtla Gutierrez, the *Registro Publico de Propiedades* (RPP)⁹⁸ in Comitán and the *Diario Oficial de la Federacion* in the research of this thesis. Here I found the information I was looking for; historical facts, figures and government declarations regarding ejido Tabasco.⁹⁹ These archives will be accounted for in the bibliography.

I want to mention some archives to which I never was granted access. Both the *Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos* (CNDH) – the National Human Rights Comity – and the *Comisión Internacional de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas* (FRAYBA) – International Human Rights Committee Fray Bartolomé de las Casas¹⁰⁰ – would not let me use their archives, even when I had specific requests. The police in Las Margaritas would not approve my request for documentation on some arrests or reports that would have served the purpose of this thesis. Neither was I granted access to documentation on landownership in ejido Tabasco today.¹⁰¹

In my search for official documents and archives, I found that in more cases than not were the archives non-existent.¹⁰² In the archives of the diocese of San Cristobal I found nothing of particular interest, the same goes for the *Archivo Historico del Estado de Chiapas* – The Historical Archive of Chiapas in Tuxtla Gutierrez.

I do not use many newspaper articles. Despite having gone through many archives I found little of great interest. On a curious note: I visited the FLN – the Zapatista “mother organisation” – museum in Monterrey, in the old house of the Yañes brothers, both of which were leaders of the FLN at one time.¹⁰³ I was the only visitor during summer and fall 2006, and the place was turned into a left leaning summer camp for kids. But I got to see the paper press hidden in a hole in the basement as well as some weapons and an escape tunnel and some propaganda material.¹⁰⁴

⁹⁷ Documents are identified by 07 52 04 (for ejido Tabasco), year and page number in archives

⁹⁸ Documents are identified by name of finca and year of last update of file

⁹⁹ I was lucky: The archive of the Registro Agrario Nacional in Tuxtla was flooded in 2006, but the archives on ejido Tabasco were not harmed

¹⁰⁰ Created by the diocese of San Cristobal in 1988, this organization is probably the one with the most complete archives on human rights abuse in Chiapas

¹⁰¹ This is not, however, very relevant for this thesis, which covers a time scope of some 60 years, from the mid 1930s to the end of the 1990s

¹⁰² This was the case of ejido Tabasco, Tierra y Libertad and la CIOAC, as well as La Castalia.

¹⁰³ Big brother Cesar Yañes was killed by the police in the 1970s dirty war, his brother Fernando Yañes was to become Comandante German – the only one superior to Subcomandante Marcos in EZLN / the FLN. (Tello Diaz 2005)

¹⁰⁴ The full name of the museum is *Casa Museo del Doctor Margil*, in Monterrey in northern Mexico. Subcomandante Marcos mentions this museum in a letter to comandante German in 2002: “In this house museum, we find testimonies of a fundamental part of our history as Zapatistas, history that we are proud of ... That house museum is Zapatista.” (EZLN 2002)

Fieldwork among *the other*

When entering ejido Tabasco, I found myself a stranger among *the other*, visiting the unknown at its own turf. This inter-cultural communication is not easy. One necessary question must be asked: Is it possible for me – a westerner – to understand the Mexican Tojolabal? Or more general: Can we hope to understand the other?

Norwegian historian Finn Fuglestad discusses this from the perspective of a scholar on African history in the essay *How to Write African History in the postmodern Era*.¹⁰⁵ Fuglestad claims that the material ("western") historical approach does little more than reduce Africa and its history. Fuglestad claims that the academic discipline of history is only useful in two kinds of societies: The ones who have a Year 0 – when some goddess manifested, and in the secular societies. This leads Fuglestad into stating that history is a western discipline. He asks whether it is possible to apply material (economic) driving forces to what he calls "total-religious" societies – and the answer is no. The way of thinking and rationalizing is totally different in such societies.

That does not, however, mean that Fuglestad gives up hope of being able to understand other continents (and other times, for that matter). He finds comfort in what he calls his "Post modern laundry list" – meaning he picks what serves his purpose from post-modern thought. Thus, says Fuglestad: Hayden White, American historian, says that history also is historical philosophy – the philosophy of man. This means that history is not a purely empirical science – it is also a philosophy. Writing about human beings of the past, we do so based on some assumptions as to what man is, and about the driving forces behind his actions. This implicates that history never become a real science, according to Fuglestad. There are no laws in history, just regularities. Thus, says Fuglestad, there can be no proof of rights and wrongs in history – just plausible explanations.¹⁰⁶

Fuglestad also discusses the term cultural relativism, and whether it is possible for the scholar to disengage from his *Weltanschauung*. If not, says Fuglestad, the (historical) study of different societies becomes nothing more than some kind of competition over which has the best civilization. If one adds to this that, according to Fuglestad, objectivity is impossible – because history is not a universal discipline, and the historical line of thinking that dominates in the west leaves no space for the other to be understood on his own terms

¹⁰⁵ Fuglestad 1999

¹⁰⁶ Op.cit. Fuglestad's discussion is somewhat more profound than what is offered here, but for the purpose of this discussion, this is a sufficient summary.

– the other becomes the loser, and not someone worthy of respect. This is, in Fuglestad's term, writing history standing on only one foot.

And that is that? I will not, then, be able to understand ejido Tabasco because of the distance in time, kilometres and traditions? That does not seem to be Fuglestad's conclusion. History may work also in other societies than the western ones – but considering where one stands is of great importance.

Knut Kjeldstadli, in the essay *Det fengslende ordet. Om den "språklige vendingen" i historiefaget* writes that the linguistic turn in historical science seemingly leaves us with an understanding of an "us vs. the other", and that our very culture impedes the understanding of others. Our horizon is different than theirs; our language blocks understanding – and language, in post modern thought, constitutes reality; translation from one to the other is impossible; and, thus, history becomes the history of and about foreign places, and foreign places are impossible to understand, according to the more consequent adherents of the linguistic turn.¹⁰⁷

But then Kjeldstadli turns the linguistic turn on its head. The other does have an idiom. This feature – having a language – is shared by the other and us. That we are all of the same species thus gives us something to build on. That is, to Kjeldstadli, the first step on the road to a common platform of understanding. Does it have to be either all dark or fully transparent? Is not partial understanding better than no understanding at all? This does not, however, mean that differences do not matter. But it means that the road to mutual understanding is discussing and acknowledging the methods we use when writing and researching. It does not, then, have to be one or the other.

How to get access, and keeping in mind the gatekeepers

With the above in mind, I entered Chiapan reality. Ejido Tabasco is situated some 22 kilometres from the town of Las Margaritas, the capital of the region, in *La cañada de Soledad* – the valley of solitude (see maps 2.1 and 2.2). To get to ejido Tabasco from Las Margaritas, I had to catch the local transportation, a small bus holding some 12 passengers. This transport would take me to the crossing leading to ejido Tabasco alongside the paved road, but not without surprises: We would wait, for hours, for the bus to fill up, or we would go shopping for some of the passengers or stop for hours in one of the communities located between Las Margaritas and ejido Tabasco. From the paved road, there is a 45

¹⁰⁷ Kjeldstadli 1997

minutes walk to the heart of ejido Tabasco, which today consists of four communities: Ejido Tabasco, Tabasco 2000, Medellin del Carmen and Emiliano Zapata.¹⁰⁸

In ejido Tabasco, I contacted the only name I knew, that of a social leader in one of the four communities that today make up what used to be the united ejido Tabasco.¹⁰⁹ He granted me an interview and promised to establish contact with the rest of the community for me. But as time went on, I found that I was unable to contact other people in the ejido. Despite talking to the *comisariado ejidal*, the formal head of the community, leaving letters and recommendations explaining my intentions, I was not accepted by the community, even sensing suspicion and hostility towards me.

This went on for the first two weeks, during which time I only got to interview the above mentioned leader, a representative of ejido Tabasco in Las Margaritas and the community of Medellin del Carmen collectively.¹¹⁰ The interviews were controlled by the social leader with whom I first established contact. When seeking contact with the people of Tabasco 2000, through the *comisariado ejidal*, I was denied access and eventually chased out of the community by people yelling ¡*Que se vaya, cabron!* – Get out of here, you bastard!

After this initial period, Padre Ramon Castillo of the Catholic Church institution la Castalia in Comitán, an institution that has played an important part in the recent history of ejido Tabasco, as I will show in chapter 5, invited me to go to ejido Tabasco with him. When introduced by Padre Ramon Castillo as a friend of his and a university student, not a government agent, doors opened for me in ejido Tabasco. I was granted access to talk to most of the people I wanted to interview.¹¹¹

That I was introduced by a Catholic priest – an outsider and a Hispanic – has some interesting points to it. It shows, first of all, the influence of the Catholic Church. It also meant that I was seen as part of the Catholic Church. This opened doors for me, but I guess it also coloured the conversations about the history of the community – nobody would criticise La Castalia in my presence, for instance. That would probably never have been a

¹⁰⁸ Access to the village was facilitated in 1998, by the new “highway” – a two lane, paved road, taking travellers east from Las Margaritas, towards the Lacandon jungle.

¹⁰⁹ The community split into four smaller ones in the late 1990s, due to internal conflict and access to more land in the aftermath of the Zapatista uprising. Today, the relationship between the four communities is basically sound and good, as opposed to some rather difficult years immediately after the split-up.

¹¹⁰ Though not the ideal form of interviewing, such group interviews at least given an impression of the truth agreed upon by the society as a whole. As the US based historian and anthropologist Jan Vansina writes: “Group interviews, while not desirable in principle, are often unavoidable, and in certain circumstances become desirable. [...] The information is minimal. But group testimony may also be customary and a guarantee of truth. [...] Statements acquire the character of official accounts.” (Vansina 1985 p 62)

¹¹¹ My experience thus proves these words from anthropologist David M. Fetterman: “Walking into a community cold can have a chilling effect on ethnographic research. Community members may not be interested in the individual ethnographer or in the work. An intermediary or go-between can open doors otherwise locked to outsiders.” (Fetterman 1989 p 43)

problem, seeing that many of my informant were *catequistas*, people who are educated by the church and are the representatives of the church and the social leaders in such communities.¹¹²

Due to internal conflicts, I had to choose which parts of the ejido I wanted to speak to. I was, as I have explained, granted interviews in Medellin del Carmen before Padre Ramon Castillo helped me contact the rest of the community. After the Padre's introduction and my choosing to focus on ejido Tabasco, the biggest of the four communities originating in united ejido Tabasco, the people of Medellin del Carmen treated me with less enthusiasm. As for Tabasco 2000, I was never allowed to speak to them in public, but I managed to get some good interviews by individuals driving me back to Las Margaritas at night etc. The part of the community that still remains loyal to the Zapatistas, Emiliano Zapata, did not welcome me to visit. But I was nonetheless granted an interview with one of the leaders of the community.

Interviewing in the field

I wanted for my informants to tell the history of ejido Tabasco. Thus, I set out to do so-called life-span interviews, but focusing more on some specific events than others.¹¹³ For this, I used an interview guide with some 20 questions about key events based on what I had read about other communities and the general history of Chiapas. I used this guide as exactly that; a guide in the process of interviewing, without letting it limit the conversations. Thus, I used a semi-structural interview guide, but mixed this approach with what anthropologist David M. Fetterman calls "informal interviews" with "a specific but implicit research agenda."¹¹⁴ All interviews were done in Spanish. The people in ejido Tabasco, the men at least, speak very good Spanish, but at times use words and phrasings I was not familiar with. My Spanish is that of city and university. That caused some minor communication problems, but was not a big problem in general. But as Jan Vansina says: Some words are key words, and cannot be understood by someone not thoroughly acquainted with the culture of origin.¹¹⁵ I cannot exclude the possibility of that having happened to me.

¹¹² For a full definition of the catequista function, see chapter 5

¹¹³ Much as suggests Norwegian historian Dagfinn Slettan: "For a Master student [...] interested in one particular field, it would be fruitful to have some clear limitations of the subject and relatively few and distinct issues." (Slettan 1981, p 47)

¹¹⁴ Fetterman 1989, p 48

¹¹⁵ Vansina 1985 p 84

Tradition and collective memory

The chronicles I have recorded cover a time span of some 100 years, the oldest accounts stemming from the early 20th century. That means none of my informants actually lived in the first period they speak of. Thus, according to Norwegian professor in the studies of folklore Bjarne Hodne, these accounts are *traditions*, meaning they have been through a filter of *tradering*, or communication.¹¹⁶ Such accounts are what Hodne calls *kronikat*; accounts of actual events not exposed to fictitious additions. With time, the *kronikats* change when “the details disappear and the account moves closer towards similar accounts in form and content. The *kronikat* becomes a historical saga.”¹¹⁷ Another important note on traditions: They have been communicated, and this happens in a social environment. Thus, such accounts will “to a great degree reflect the environment’s perception of the accounts and relationship that they describe”.¹¹⁸ All the accounts, also the ones of a more recent nature, in this thesis fall into this category of communicated memories.¹¹⁹ Thus, the meaning is socially formed in the community. Can they then be trusted and used as sources? Hodne concludes that with awareness of the nature of the sources, they can and should be used. If nothing else, traditions may serve as sources of knowledge about worldviews and norms in the environment of study.¹²⁰ In any case I will, as mentioned above, balance my oral sources against other sources where possible.

The informants

In total I have done 23 interviews, totalling some 36 hours of tape. Nine of these interviews I did with people from ejido Tabasco, many of them I did with more than one person at the time. Most of my informants were social leaders in past or present time, or *key actors* that provided “detailed historical data, knowledge about contemporary interpersonal relationship (including conflicts), and a wealth of information about the nuances of

¹¹⁶ Hodne separates between memories and traditions. The former are “not communicated” personal memories or experiences. The latter are accounts of personal experiences in past or present time, fixated and communicated to other, thus becoming “communicated memories”, and as such become traditions. Another form of traditions are accounts by different informants/story tellers spread in time, that, through fixation, become different genres of traditions. (Hodne 1981, p 35)

¹¹⁷ Hodne 1981, p 37

¹¹⁸ Op. Cit, p 39

¹¹⁹ A short note on traditions in the areas of Zapatista influence: As is common in popular sectors in Mexico, events are described and performed through songs, the so-called *corridos*. This phenomenon appeared during the Mexican Revolution as a way of making news travel from place to place. Just one example of the Zapatista use of this: I bought a disc in the Zapatista community of Oventic by local outfit *Nuevo Amanecer*. They sing of the bad government and about the heroics of EZLN, and thus reproduces the communicated memory that Hodne speaks of. (Nuevo Amanecer 2006)

¹²⁰ Hodne 1981, p 43

everyday life.”¹²¹ My key actor informants gave valuable information, but at the same time had their own interests in mind when talking to me. They had also participated actively in the events discussed in. What would they tell me? And what could they tell me – would not their view be blocked by the proximity to the events?¹²² I have tried to choose between different versions or balance the informants against each other to avoid getting totally lost in my informant’s world view. To help in the selection of versions, I rely on other, outside sources when these exist, or try to balance the information against outsider’s version of the same accounts. In total, I formally interviewed some 30 people in the community (including the group interview). In one case I have found it best to hide the informants identity and I have somewhat altered and generalized the informant’s account. This is done to protect the informant from internal repercussion as well as that of the government, seeing as the nature of the information is disputed and delicate.¹²³ As for the identified informants, they accepted that I would use their names in my work. When they talk about their participation in EZLN, they are free to do so because the government already know who they are (as we will see in chapter 7).

The rest of the interviews I did with scholars, activists, and Catholic Church representatives. I have hidden the identity of one of these outside informants, who speaks of his past with FLN, the political-military organization that created ELZN in the early 1980s.¹²⁴ I taped all of the interviews, to ensure that I would be able to play them back.¹²⁵

I have it on tape. Now what? Some remarks on the trust in the oral material

So, what is it I have recorded? What do these interviews actually contain? Are they useful sources? Knut Kjeldstadli writes that when it comes to approving or using an oral source, the process is no different from that of other sources. The interview must be tested by its inner consistency, cross-checked against other material and placed in a bigger context. This means seeing the interview as a whole, weighing every claim up against the source’s total

¹²¹ Fetterman 1989 p 58

¹²² Knut Kjeldstadli quotes Mao Zedong, saying that “the frog in the well sees the opening of the well and thinks it sees all heaven”. (Kjeldstadli 1981, p 67)

¹²³ I hide the identity not only because of my thesis and the information used here, but also because of other outsiders who may be interested in the account offered by this informant. Without any illusions of the readership of a master thesis, I follow Fetterman here, when he claims that anonymity may help protect informants from the researcher’s larger audience. (Fetterman 1989, p 134)

¹²⁴ The reasoning is similar to that above – a hidden identity is necessary due to the topic of the interview: The violent past of this informant in this organization. (Interview with “Enrique”)

¹²⁵ “[The use of a tape-recorder] enables repeated analysis not only of the source’s data, but also the very situation in which it happened, and is thus a primary document of the greatest value.” (Borchgrevink 1981, p 86). Also, working as a journalist, I have experienced that once you stop taking notes, the conversation will come to a halt.

reliability, character, overview, etcetc. It also implies confirming, and mixing, oral sources with other sources. Does the information seem plausible compared to other accounts?¹²⁶ I have found most of my sources to be reliable, but there are large portions of the material that I doubt as well. The discussion about my informants and my use of the information is a constant one in this thesis, based on what has been mentioned in this section.

Gender

I barely touch the topic of gender in this thesis. Where I mention the role of the woman as opposed to that of the man, it is to show a general evolution the historical process of ejido Tabasco. This is due to the focus of this thesis, and in part to the lack of female informants. This may be considered a weakness, but limited time and space make for priorities. I only did one interview with the women in the community of study, a collective interview with the whole female population of Medellin del Carmen.¹²⁷ The lack of women informants is caused by the fact that the women were not comfortable speaking to me, a male outsider; that all the interviews were done in Spanish, a language many of the *Tabasqueñas* do not speak that well; and that the men would not let me speak to the women. Outside of ejido Tabasco, however, I interviewed basically the same amount of women as I did men.¹²⁸ I also spoke Tabasqueñas informally. This leads us to the last topic of this sub-chapter:

Observations in the field

This is a historical work, not an anthropological one.¹²⁹ Therefore I will not use too many field observations. But when I find it useful or necessary, I will give some short accounts of what I did see in the community. But most of the observations serve more as a background, helping me to understand and conceptualize the reality of Tojolabal Chiapas.

One note: Most of the sources I have used, oral as written, in the process of writing this thesis are Spanish. All translations are mine where not otherwise indicated.

¹²⁶ Kjeldstadli 1981

¹²⁷ This interview was conducted by Jessica Allande, my female companion in the field. She stayed with me, helping with the interviews and even taking photos filming some small clips that I use to go back to remember the context. Allande stayed with me for roughly half of the time I spent with the Tabasqueños.

¹²⁸ For a full overview of all the interviews, see the sources section.

¹²⁹ I never lived in ejido Tabasco; I stayed in “nearby” Las Margaritas. I spent a total of some 15 days in the community.

Chapter 3: Short summary of Tojolabal history

Today, Tojolabal is spoken by some 38 000 people in Chiapas.¹³⁰ Almost all of the Tojolabales live in the Tojolabal region that consists of three sub-regions: The region of Tierras frias; the Tojolabal Cañadas of the Lacandon jungle and, finally, the Valley Region, which is the region we will focus on in this thesis.¹³¹ In the Valley region we find ejido Tabasco, as well as the town of Las Margaritas. This region is situated on the lower parts of the Chiapan high planes. The altitude differs from between roughly 1000 meters to 1500. (See maps 2.1 and 2.2) This region is where we find the longest Tojolabal tradition in Chiapas, dating back long before the Spanish conquest, but with centralization due to the emergence of the fincas – big farms – in the 19th century.

The main agricultural products in the area are corn and beans, both sown twice a year: Once in fall and another time before the heavy rains set in, usually in May. The Tojolabales – as free men during the last 70 years, or on the finca in the 19th century – in this region also traditionally produce some coffee to be sold on the world market, fruits and, in much lesser extent after leaving the fincas in the 1930s, cattle. Coffee and cattle give a small income that is used to buy products needed from nearby markets in Las Margaritas or Comitán: Salt, sugar, medicine, etcetc.¹³²

The arrival of the Spanish

The whereabouts of the Tojolabales in Chiapas at the time of the arrival of the Spanish in today's Mexico in the early 16th century is somewhat disputed due to few existing sources on the subject.¹³³ Anthropologist Gudrun Lenkersdorf¹³⁴ at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) claims that the Tojolabales had their strongest settlements

¹³⁰ There have been debates about the estimates of the Tojolabal population. Anthropologist Roberta Montagú puts the population at 40,000 or more in 1969 (Montagu 1969). Some years earlier, in the early 1960s, Mexican anthropologist Alfonso Villa Rojas had put the Tojolabal population in Comitán, La Trinitaria, La Independencia, and Las Margaritas at almost 10,000. (Mattiace 2002) Later studies estimated the population to be between 32,000 and 33,000 in the municipalities of Comitán, La Trinitaria, La Independencia, Altamirano, and Las Margaritas. (Mattiace 2002)

¹³¹ Cuadriello Olivos & Megchun Rivera 2006

¹³² Op.cit.

¹³³ Mexican anthropologist Mario Humberto Ruz noted in 1984 that only 132 academic pages (not counting linguistic studies) had been written on the Tojolabales (Humberto Ruz 1984). Anthropologist Roberta Montagú notes that even by the early 20th century, the region was considered unpopulated by mapmakers (Montagu 1969). This lack of sources about the Tojolabales has been filled by the four-volume study edited by Humberto Ruz and works by Estrada Saavedra, Gemma van der Haart and Shannan Mattiace, but the list is still short.

¹³⁴ The wife of Carlos Lenkersdorf, who was described as the household anthropologist of many of the Zapatista supporters in the discussion about literature. The couple lived together in Tojolabal Chiapas in the 1970s, working as Christian activists. Both have later done academic work on the subject.

around the area of Comitán upon the arrival of the Europeans.¹³⁵ According to Lenkersdorf the Tojolabal region at the time of the European conquest ran from the upper basin of the Grijalva river to the Montebello lakes, and maybe as far north as to the actual town of Altamirano.¹³⁶ The reasons for this lack of investigation may derive from what some anthropologists claim is the impression among scholars that the Tojolabales have lost traditional customs such as native clothing and language.¹³⁷ In other word, the Tojolabales may be considered too little “purely indigenous” to be worth academic research. The indigenous praxis of self-governing through civil-religious cargo systems was also lost to some degree during the period spent under the patron’ controll.

During the time of *La Colonia* – the 300 years of Spanish reign in Mexico – the Tojolabales were separated in church congregations and made subjects under *Las Leyes de Indias* – The Indian Laws. These laws, suffice to say in the context of this thesis, established a set of administrative and juridical rules that ensured a hierarchical order, where the indigenous peoples were separated from, and subjected to, the Spanish overlords.¹³⁸ The latter all answered to the viceroy, who, in his turn was directly under the command of the Spanish Crown.¹³⁹

Upon the arrival of the Spanish, the Tojolabales lost control of the communal lands they had lived and worked on. The area around Comitán was seen by the newcomers as a good place for cultivating grain and sugar, and raising cattle. Dominican priests first administered the lands for the Spanish, making the natives subjects, tined to the land and christened, thus a double dependency was created. Belonging to a congregation meant having to pay taxes to the head of the church. More often than not this tax was so elevated that it made, combined with the very nature of being subject to an outside force, many Tojolabales denounce their ethnicity. They went to live in the city of Comitán¹⁴⁰ as

¹³⁵ G. Lenkersdorf 1986, p 80

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Mattiace 2002. Monolingualism in Tojolabal communities is rare because of the relatively frequent contact between Tojolabales and non-indigenous since the colonial period. In ejido Tabasco most (men) speak good Spanish.

¹³⁸ After having been diminished by illness brought by the Spanish, war and deportations in the first decades of the Spanish conquest (75 % of the indigenous population is believed to have died in the early 16th century), the situation in Chiapas was stabilized upon the arrival of the Dominican brotherhood. They installed themselves in Chiapan land, and organised the Tojolabales (and other peoples) in congregations – small villages where the indigenous population worked the land of the Dominicans, protected by different saints, all of which were “given” to each congregation by the Dominicans. This system was to survive until the end of the Spanish reign in Mexico. In the 1850s the Dominicans were thrown out of Chiapas and forced to flee to Guatemala. (de Vos 1994, p 77)

¹³⁹ This system was established in all the viceroyalties of the Spanish thrown in Latin America. (Williamson 1992)

¹⁴⁰ American anthropologist Shannan L. Mattiace writes that “Certainly the Tojolabales became much more acculturated linguistically and in terms of social structure than the Tzotziles, Tzeltales, and Choles, Chiapas

meztisos – the mixed ethnicity of the Spanish and the indigenous peoples that later, some 400 years after the conquest, was to become a cornerstone in the official creation of a Mexican national identity.¹⁴¹

Independence and the emergence of the finca system¹⁴²

Mexico became independent from Spain in 1823, after a ten year long war over its freedom. Chiapas became part of Guatemala, but chose to be annexed by Mexico in 1823.¹⁴³ With independence from Spain and the creation of the *finca* system – a system where the landowner is master and head of the people working and living on his lands, not unlike the feudal European system of villainage – in the 19th century, the Tojolabales were made dependent on the emerging landowner class that positioned itself as the owners of basically all fertile lands in the Tojolabal region of Chiapas.¹⁴⁴ The finca system was both an economic system and a system of domination, being the hub of regional life, laying the foundation for (mostly indigenous) peasant colonization.¹⁴⁵

According to historian Jan De Vos, *la franja finquera* – the finca belt

[...] extends, in the shape of a half moon, from Palenque to Comitán, passing through Yajalón, Ocosingo, Altamirano and Las Margaritas. This sub region, separating Los Altos from the Lacandon, was populated by haciendas [fincas] from the end of colonial times and has been, due to the agricultural activity, integrated in Chiapan economic and social life ever since.¹⁴⁶ [See map 2.1]

The finca system is tightly connected to the loss of lands on the part of the indigenous population. During the 19th century, with the enforcement of the big landowners, the indigenous peoples had little choice other than move to the fincas and offer their services. This led to a self-enforcing circle: Because of the ever expanding fincas, the indigenous population had to work for the white owner of the lands, and because of the easy access to manpower, the finca sector could grow fast and steady. When appropriating new lands, the

three other large Maya groups – groups that, together with the Tojolabales, would dominate the Zapatista movement”. (Mattiace 2002)

¹⁴¹ “The world of the Tojolabales retreated to the periphery, or Indian belt, that began in the marginal neighbourhoods of the old city of Balún Canán [Comitán], where it alternated with the *castas* in mixed neighbourhoods, and, above all, to the region’s constellation of farms and some ranches” (Humberto Ruz, 1992, p 18, translated by and quoted in Mattiace, 2002). For a discussion on the subject of Meztiso Mexico and the distance between official rhetoric and praxis, The book Mexico profundo offers good information (Bonfil Batalla 1992)

¹⁴² In the Mexican population censuses before 1960, “hacienda” and “finca” were used inter changeably. (INEGI)

¹⁴³ Escalante Gonzalbo, Pablo et.al 2005

¹⁴⁴ The land that was made available when the Dominicans where forced to leave the state of Chiapas in the mid 1850s was handed over to families such as the Dominguez and the Castellanos, thus creating what is still today called La familia Chiapaneca, a handful of powerful landowning families. (Garcia de Leon 1997)

¹⁴⁵ Leyva Solano & Ascencio Franco 1996, p 58

¹⁴⁶ de Vos 2002

new elites quite simply also appropriated the manpower needed to work the lands, or, in plain English: The indigenous peoples living on the land followed the land. Thus, the indigenous peoples were transformed into a class of finca workers. In the region of Los Llanos de Comitán and the rest of the finca belt, the expansion of the fincas, where cattle, maize and beans were the main products, happened on the lands formerly belonging to the indigenous population (mainly Tojolabal and Tzeltal) and leaving these with few other options than to start working for the new elites, the patrones of the fincas.¹⁴⁷

The significance of the finca system

The new conditions laid on the Tojolabales with the emergence of the finca system were hard. Starting with the independence, the subordination of the native population was not purely based on ethnicity, but also on the heavy debts owed to the landowners for using the lands or buying goods in the store on the fincas. The Tojolabales were basically villains, not having the opportunity to pay their debts and, thus, buy their freedom. By law, the landowners could remunerate the indigenous workers as they pleased, as well as the land. As a consequence, the properties of the landowners got bigger, and the Tojolabales, with very few exceptions, were made subjects to the *finqueros* – the finca owners, working the lands of the fincas for little or no money.

The finca was not just the centre of production in Chiapas. It was also the place where the political and social order was reproduced. Life on the fincas had many and very different impacts on the Tojolabal population. Life as villains was hard, but the finca system offered at least stable access to food and lands, thus making sure the Tojolabales could survive physically. But the finca also offered the possibility of reproducing the cultural aspects of being Tojolabal. Just one example of this: Subjects to the Catholic Church, the Tojolabales were still free to live out their religious ceremonies.¹⁴⁸ This created a strange mix of dogmatic Christianity and indigenous "nature" religions that we will look at in greater detail in chapter six.

The system of the fincas also created internal division among the Tojolabales. As mentioned above, some went to live in the cities as meztisos, and were in that way incorporated in the national project of Mexico. As for most of the Tojolabales, they were

¹⁴⁷ Humberto Ruz 1992, and García de Leon 1997

¹⁴⁸ Op. cit.

made subjects to the local elites, living at the mercy and will of the finqueros. They became what I will refer to as *mozos* in the rest of this thesis.¹⁴⁹

Thus, being Tojolabal in a rural settlement meant living at the will of the finquero. From the mid-1800s the suppression was no longer based solely on ethnicity, but the racist rhetoric and the material situation combined to make the position of the Tojolabales even harder. The finqueros were hispanics and held the power, the *mozos* were indigenous and subjected to the power of the former. This hierarchy was grounded on a combination of biology, social structures and status, economy and cultural aspects, and recreated itself with each new generation.¹⁵⁰ The Tojolabales worked constantly to improve their position within the existing system, something that enabled them to conserve important parts of their culture and autonomy. The power of the elders and the holy men, to name but a few examples, was not broken by life on the *fincas*. This has led anthropologists Gomez Hernandez and Humberto Ruz to argue that Tojolabal identity instead of being lost was recreated on the *fincas* during this period – roughly from the 1850s to 1940s.¹⁵¹

Life on finca Medellin – the future ejido Tabasco¹⁵²

What was life like on the finca? The few accounts we have all tell a story of low payment, if at all. The Tabasqueños talk of the *tienda* – a drugstore on the finca where the patron sold goods at stiff prices. This is a brief account on how Javier Solis, later to be the owner of (the remains of) the finca Medellin, enriched himself at the cost of the Tojolabales working the land when he was supervisor, or *mayordomo*, on La Floresta in the 1930s:

He sold booze, clothes, soap – anything. If you bring him a pound of salt, he would only give you a fistful of salt in exchange... The mayordomo controlled everything. He buys on the cheap and sells it expensive. This went on, the prices rising, until he one day had gathered enough to buy Medellin.¹⁵³

¹⁴⁹ On the *fincas*, workers separated in two groups: *los acasillados* – those who worked to pay off their debts – those we have called the villains above; and *los baldios*, free men working the lands. In other parts of Chiapas, this distinction was an important one, but no so much in the Tojolabal region, where none of the two groups in reality were free to do anything but work the lands of the patron. The *baldios* could leave, but where to, and to do what? They had to pay a rent to work the only accessible lands – that of the *fincas*. They were granted the right to use *la milpa* – small parts of the land for personal cultivation. For the rest of their work they received very low payments. The *acasillados* could not leave until they had paid off their debts, something that was made close to impossible by the prices of necessary goods in the store owned by the landowner. I use, somewhat unprecise, the word *mozo* to describe both the *acasillados* and the *baldios*, seeing as the distinction serves little purpose in this thesis. As describes Shannan L. Mattiace: “In Chiapas, the existence of the *baldío* became more widespread after state laws were passed in 1847 that dispossessed Indians of their lands and obligated them to live permanently on *fincas* as *baldíos*, exchanging their manual labour for permission to live and work on the land. In the Tojolabal region, the term most often used to describe the sharecroppers on the *fincas* was *mozo baldío*” (Mattiace 2002)

¹⁵⁰ This did not mean that there was no dialogue and mutual affection between the groups. Even the finquero, despite his power, depended on his subjects.

¹⁵¹ Gomez Hernandez & Humberto Ruz 1992.

¹⁵² See figure 3.1 for a photograph of finca Medellin. It is, as can be seen, modest.

¹⁵³ Humberto Ruz & Gómez Hernández 1992, p 390

The tiendas on the fincas was a way of indebting the workers. Debts were inherited from generation to generation, and the prices the people had to pay in these tiendas were way above “market price”. Padre Ramon Castillo of La Castalia in Comitán, one of the religious workers with the most knowledge and influence in the region of Las Margaritas, found a Tojolabal man hiding in the mountains from the landowner and the landowner's family.¹⁵⁴ He had fled from his patron because of his debts, knowing he would never be able to pay him back. The debt amounted to less than 100 pesos.¹⁵⁵

Also, this account from one of the elders of ejido Tabasco, makes it possible to understand parts of life as a mozo on the finca Medellín:

The patron had different jobs that needed to be done. [The mozos] worked from 6 am to 6 pm, and what did they earn? Not a single cent. The patron gave them all the tools, but they never made any money. They got some maize, some beans and salt.¹⁵⁶

This same interview also lets us understand how work on the finca was organized. The patron's men supervised the indigenous labourers.

The patron had a mayordomo, and he again had his puntero. The puntero was responsible for getting the mozos to work. The two of them supervised the workers. They worked every day. Clean sugar canes, work the milpa... they did it all. They had to build and maintain the main buildings, and their tools were primitive. Axes were used for all the wood work... the women were moling the salt, they had to clean the toilets of the patrones...¹⁵⁷

With what kind of products did the mozos work? The production on the fincas was almost exclusively agricultural, except for the odd construction or maintenance of buildings. Most of it was for self-consumption:

More than anything, sugar cane and coffee was the main commerce here. Maize and beans we produced for our own consumption. Moling the sugar into Panela was hard work. But from the Panela you get booze, which could be sold. They also worked with cattle. But, of course, everything was owned by the patron.¹⁵⁸

The people of ejido Tabasco talk of suffering, but still we have no accounts of physical abuse of the mozos in ejido Tabasco. From other fincas there are many stories of punishment, ordered arbitrarily by the patron. This one is from ejido Plan de Ayala:

There was a lot of punishment before. They hung people on a hook. If you lost kettle, you had to sign a piece of paper admitting to having stolen it and eaten it [thus making the labourer indebted, making sure he

¹⁵⁴ Albeit in the 1960s and thus not in the period of discussion here, but still the account gives an impression of the situation discussed.

¹⁵⁵ Interview with informant 7

¹⁵⁶ Interview with informant 4

¹⁵⁷ Interview with informant 4. As we have seen above, the mayordomo on finca Medellín got rich enough doing his job to buy the whole finca. He was not the only one taking advantage of the Tojolabales by selling them goods at high prices in the region. (Humberto Ruz & Gómez Hernández 1992)

¹⁵⁸ Interview with informant 4

would not leave the finca]. If you declined, claiming you never had stolen, you would be punished, sometimes to death... They would hang you, and leave you to die.¹⁵⁹

The finca system comes to an end

The breakdown of the finca system started in the central parts of Mexico, with the state of Morelos and the movement of general Emiliano Zapata – the first Zapatistas.¹⁶⁰ This happened during the Mexican Revolution, a civil war that ended the almost 40 year long rule of dictator Porfirio Diaz and lasted from 1910 to the early 1920s. Land reform was one of the driving factors behind the revolution, at least the peasant revolution in central Mexican states such as Morelos. The revolutionary manifesto *Plan de Ayala* demanded that land be given back to farmers where big fincas had expanded on their behalf. Even more radical was the suggested expropriation of lands to benefit small rural communities. In the Mexican constitution of 1917, these claims from the Plan de Ayala were included.¹⁶¹

When the revolutionary forces came to Chiapas, they burned the books keeping track of debts and promised to redistribute lands, making the indigenous the owners of their own lands. But the Mexican Revolution never really made a difference in the question of landownership in Chiapas.¹⁶² Not only did the troops of the revolutionary general Carranza not succeed in Chiapas. The Tojolabales and the rest of the indigenous population in the finquero belt did not receive these radicals and their world altering message with joy. In more cases than not, the mozos chose to fight with their patron against these outside forces, including saving the books keeping score of their personal debt from being destroyed.¹⁶³ The reason for this support for the landowners may have differed, but I follow many others in subscribing it to the relationship of dependence that had been created and recreated over the generations between the patron and the mozos. Entering a new and unknown world solely because outside manipulation made it possible was too big a step for the Tojolabales in Chiapas.¹⁶⁴ But this triumph of the finca system was to be its last days of glory, as we will see in the next chapter.

¹⁵⁹ Interview with informant 11. Ejido Plan de Ayala is turned into a museum showing how the Tojolabales lived and worked on the fincas.

¹⁶⁰ I call them the first Zapatistas because that is what one of these original Zapatistas says to the masked EZLN members in a scene in the movie *Los últimos Zapatistas - Héroes olvidados*: “We were the first, now you are taking over,” the old revolutionary who fought with Emiliano Zapata during the Mexican revolution says to the young ones from EZLN. More than 80 years separate their struggles. (In Taboada Tabon 2002)

¹⁶¹ Womack, Jr. 1970

¹⁶² Many scholars claim that the revolution never came to Chiapas, and some speak of the Chiapan counter-revolution (like Núñez Rodríguez 2004, pp 31-45). It is possible, however, to claim that land reform was not realized to a great degree in Mexico at all between 1910 and -20. John Womack, Jr. seems to make this point in his classic work *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution*. (Womack, Jr. 1970)

¹⁶³ van der Haar 2001

¹⁶⁴ Garcia de Leon 1997

Chapter 4: The end of villainage – a new era in an unknown world

May 1, 1940. A new era begins for the people of ejido Tabasco. For the first time in history, they have government documents proving their ownership to their own lands, complete with finger stamps from the new ejidatarios.¹⁶⁵ A presidential resolution, published in el *Diario Oficial* October 7, 1939, states that from this day on, Tabasco is officially an ejido.¹⁶⁶ The new ejido is granted a sum total of 635, 7 hectares of land, all of it annexed from the fincas of Medellin and La Soledad.¹⁶⁷

The same handover document from May 1 1940 tells us that 32 men were granted ownership of ejido land in ejido Tabasco.¹⁶⁸ The National Census from 1940 operates with a number of 130 inhabitants in the new ejido, 65 men and 65 women. Half the men in ejido Tabasco were thus granted land in the endowment process, the rest of them either still worked for the patron on the finca or were younger members of their families, working the family land and living together with their seniors. According to the same 1940 census, only 33 people chose to remain on the finca Medellin when their fellow mozos applied for land rights.¹⁶⁹ Ten years earlier, in 1930, the census operates with a total of 140 people living and working at the finca Medellin.¹⁷⁰

The Tabasqueños applied for ejido land on February 16, 1937.¹⁷¹ Two years later they could call themselves rightful owners of the land they had been cultivating for generations. A new era had begun.

The Cardenista reforms

Lazaro Cardenas was elected president of Mexico in 1934. He was the first president to actually live up to Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution, a remainder of the Plan de Ayala manifesto in the Constitution of 1917:

Those rural settlements that lacks lands and water, or do not have these in sufficient quantities to meet the necessities of their population, have the right to be endowed with these, by taking them from neighbouring properties, while respecting private smallholdings.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁵ RAN 07 52 04, 1940: 03 – 08

¹⁶⁶ RAN 07 52 04, 1940: 01. Under Mexican law, an ejido creation and all redistribution of land had to be made public in the *Diario Oficial* – the official newspaper where all new laws and official appointments are published – in the form of a presidential decree.

¹⁶⁷ Land dotated from Medellin: 470 hectares from Eldemira Dominguez, 22 from the property of Eduardo Dominguez Mandujano. The remainder, 143, 7 hectares, was obtained from the property of Sra. Maria Castro de Serrano, hacienda La Soledad. (Map of dotacion, RAN 07 52 02, 1939: 09, signed July 12, 1939)

¹⁶⁸ The same numbers also appear in Núñez Rodríguez 2004, p 230

¹⁶⁹ National census 1940, INEGI

¹⁷⁰ National census 1930, INEGI

¹⁷¹ *Diario Oficial*, October 7, 1939

¹⁷² Quoted in van der Haar 2001. *Her translation.*

Cardenas was to redistribute almost 20 million hectares of land from 1934 to -40, whereas his predecessors¹⁷³ together reached a total of some 7 million hectares from 1917 to -34.¹⁷⁴ Cardenas used Article 27 as a means to change and modernize the Mexican agricultural sector, beneficiating both his political project and the peasant population, in large part indigenous. To Cardenas, the agricultural sector was a key factor in modernizing Mexico. To sustain industry, Mexico needed a more efficient agricultural production. Due to the international crisis of 1929, Mexico could no longer sell its goods on the international market. Where the earlier strategies had been to attract foreign investment, Cardenas (and his successor, Calles, to a lesser extent) sought to create an internal market. This was also important in order to increase the population, at the time of the crisis of 1929 totalling no more than 16,5 million in a scarcely populated country.

Cardenas radicalized the repartition of land. In Chiapas, in the period from 1930 to 1939, 2.903548 hectares were redistributed, benefiting more than 20 000 farmers.¹⁷⁵ In giving the dependent peasant population the right to own their own land, Cardenas created the Mexican corporate state. This was to have a major impact on life in ejidos such as Tabasco and Mexican history as a whole, laying the framework for a way of doing politics that lasted until the end of the 20th century. In creating the ejidos, Cardenas was able to draw the peasant population closer to the apparatus of the federal state, at the same time diminishing the power of local landlords and governments. The same was true for the urban workers – Cardenas created the *Confederación de Trabajadores de Mexico* – the Workers Confederation of Mexico (CTM) – in 1936 and the *Confederacion Nacional Campesina* – the National Peasant Confederation (CNC) – in 1938.

Cardenas intended to organize the working classes and attach them to the government so that they would back him up and serve as a counterweight against pressure from other groups, such as important businessmen from Monterrey [the financial capital of Mexico, in the north of the country] and other countries, especially the US.¹⁷⁶

Also in 1938, Cardenas created a new political party, *Partido de la Revolucion Mexicana* – the Party of the Mexican Revolution (PRM) – on the basis of the governing party. The new party, later to change its name to *Partido de la Revolucion Institucional* – the Party of the Institutional Revolution (PRI), was to rule Mexico for a period of 70 years. Cardenas built the party on different sectors: workers, farmers and the military.

¹⁷³ Alvaro Obregon (1920 – 1924), Plutarco Elias Calles (1924 – 1928), Emilio Portes Gil (1928 – 1930) and Pascual Ortiz Rubio (1930 – 1932)

¹⁷⁴ van der Haar 2002, p 49

¹⁷⁵ Montellano García 2001, p 81

¹⁷⁶ Escalante Gonzalbo et.al 2005, p 268

In this corporative scheme, the president reaffirms his role as leader of the party organisations, in charge of mediating between the different political groups. More than through elections, political problems were met and solved within the official party.¹⁷⁷

The Cardenista reforms ended with the end of Cardenas' presidency in 1940.¹⁷⁸ One short note here, as we are dealing with land reform: By 1993, more than 50 % of the land in Chiapas was either communal or ejidal. Less than 25 % was in private hands.¹⁷⁹ In Las Margaritas, the latter number was even smaller.¹⁸⁰

Leaving the finca

Getting the endowment for ejidal land and rights was just a first step in the process of creating an independent community. The Tabasqueños tell a story of struggle when they talk about the first ejiditarios. Lack of knowledge of how to work the land without the patron after generations of villainage, the bad lands given to the new ejiditarios and the obstruction from the patron combined to make the process difficult.

We were given our freedom by the government, in 1939. The governor fought for our rights. But we were given the bad lands, *pura sierra* [plain mountainside, rocks]. The finqueros held on to all the good lands, all over this cañada. But through sacrifice, struggle and unity we got our lands. When we left the finca, not only did we get the bad lands that had never been cultivated before, we had to construct new houses. The patron tried to get the people to stay, telling them they would starve if they left. Those who left had to fight. The mozos were given food to survive; when our fathers left, they had no guarantee of getting food. Some left, only to go back to live with the patron.¹⁸¹

As the quote above implies, the patron, seeing his cheap labourers leave him, tried to make the mozos stay on, using both pressure and rewards. There are accounts of patrones using their political influence to prevent the creation, or at least minimize the effects, of the ejidos in the region of Las Margaritas, as there are accounts of higher wages to make the indigenous workers stay.¹⁸²

The patron had power over his subjects, and in many cases tried everything – bribing the bureaucrats of the *Reforma Agraria*, the governing body of agriculture, and negotiations

¹⁷⁷ Escalante Gonzalbo 2005

¹⁷⁸ This does not, however, mean that all redistribution of land came to a total halt. Ejido Tabasco gets more land in the period treated in this chapter. But the tendency is one of decline in the redistribution of farmland for the ejidos. Much of the redistribution that was to take place in the following decades was driven by the handing out of national lands as well as land in the Lacandon jungle. It should be mentioned that according to historian Antonia Garcia de Leon, “the Cardenista reform was, in the last instance, favourable for the land owners”. Garcia de Leon backs this claim by showing that properties with more than 5000 hectares made for 27 % of all private property in Chiapas (as a whole) in 1940 as opposed to 29 % ten years earlier, before the presidency of Cardenas. (Garcia de Leon 2002, p 51)

¹⁷⁹ Viqueira 1999

¹⁸⁰ van der Haar 2001

¹⁸¹ Interview with informant 4

¹⁸² In Estrada Saavedra 2007

with the mozos, offering better pay, threats (to death, even) – he could to make his mozos stay with him.¹⁸³ But oftentimes these tactics were not even necessary. Many mozos chose to stay on with the patron. In the book *Memoria Baldia*, Humberto Ruz and Gomez Hernandez have gathered accounts of former mozos, including some from ejido Tabasco. One of them, Pablo Cruz Mendez, stayed on with the Patron before he “asked permission to join the ejiditarios”.¹⁸⁴ He confirms that hard work and low pay were the main reasons why he left the patron after having, initially, decided to stay with him.

That is why I now am here, because of my two sons. [The ejiditarios] almost declined when I asked permission to join the ejido, but finally they gave me room. But I left to help myself and to help my two sons; I would not let them see all the bad things with the patron. That is why I am a free man today. But I stayed on with the patron for a long time; that is true.¹⁸⁵

Pablo Cruz Mendez also explains how the patron used the fact that his mozos could not read and write to manipulate them to stay on or to make it hard enough to leave so that life on the finca would seem an easier option than starting a new life:

Sometimes people thought of leaving the patron, move to another place. And the patron would let you go. “Leave, get out of here”, he would say. “I will leave. Look at my bill. I have been working so many days”. And the patron would look at your bill, but not to give you money for the days you had been working, he only raised your debt. He would write a note, and give it to you. “Show this at the people with whom you want to work”... So you are carrying, in your own hands, a piece of paper that says that you should not be offered work. You can leave, but you have to go far.¹⁸⁶

After having lived in the world of the fincas for generations, many Tojolabales knew no other life than the one at the finca, living under the rules of the patron. Many mozos thus stayed on. For did the patron not offer food and stability? And was not the world of hierarchy a world where everyone knew his place?¹⁸⁷

Pablo Cruz Mendez also gives us an example of how hard it could be for the indigenous to imagine a new life, outside the known environment of the finca. Why believe in the people who came to tell him that it would be better to live on his own lands, to be his own master? This reaction seems typical: “What do you make of it; somebody comes to fool me, to tell me that the work should be done in this or such way? I have seen work, I know how it is supposed to be done.”¹⁸⁸

The fact that some of the mozos chose to leave the finca and become ejiditarios caused some internal problems among the Tabasqueños. For those who stayed behind, the

¹⁸³ See Estrada Saavedra 2007

¹⁸⁴ Humberto Ruz & Gómez Hernández 1992

¹⁸⁵ Op.cit.

¹⁸⁶ Humberto Ruz & Gómez Hernández 1992, pp 379

¹⁸⁷ van der Haar 2001, and García de Leon 2002

¹⁸⁸ Humberto Ruz & Gómez Hernández 1992

situation was to become one of double strains: The patron would need them to work harder than before, and the newly become ejiditarios would not necessarily want to give a hand to those who had not fought for the ejidal rights.

There was conflict. The ones who stayed were criticising those who left. The ones who stayed were suffering, my father told me. They were pressured, and had to work even harder than before. But even those who left were starving. They had to leave what they had been cultivating behind, with the patron, and start all over. They had to cultivate land that had never been used for cultivation before. But, as time went by, the ones who stayed with the patron saw that those who had left were better off, that they were their own masters. And one by one, they came to ask permission to join the ejiditarios, due to violence and pressure [from the patron].¹⁸⁹

In other regions of Chiapas, this process was not as peaceful as the one described here. The colonization of the Lacandon jungle, almost unpopulated until the 1950s, took place because landowners were able to prevent the endowment of their lands, lack of available land or internal fighting in the indigenous communities. But the Tabasqueños were able to stay on the land they had worked for generations. “We suffered a lot. And thus, for better or for worse, we have to stay on these lands, because here our forefathers were suffering, and they built, with their own hands, what we see here today.”¹⁹⁰ As it turns out, they were willing to fight for their right to this land, as we will see in the following chapters.

Effects of Cardenismo in ejido Tabasco

We have seen that president Cardenas built his political project on corporativism. How did this affect the Tojolabales of ejido Tabasco, Las Margaritas, Chiapas?

Most of all, it altered relations between the patron and his subjects. The former used to be the master of the Tojolabales. On the finca, the patron took on every form of power: judge in conflicts, police authority, teacher, doctor... The patron and his family, with almost eternal bloodlines and eternal rights, were the kings of the finca system, and thus of the Tojolabal world. Because it could take days to get from the town of Las Margaritas to the fincas, the Catholic Church let the patrons perform religious ceremonies, even weddings, thus adding to his power.¹⁹¹ The patron organized the property, production and labour. He made the necessary investments, kept control of the animals and gave rights to the mozos concerning farming. When the Tabasqueños were granted ejido rights, the patron,

¹⁸⁹ Interview with informant 13. The accounts I got from the Tabasqueños on this topic all coincide. Seeing as they are talking about their ancestors and retelling stories they have only heard, it would be fair to assume that the version I get is the one they have agreed on in the passing of time. Thus, is *tradert* information, as discussed in chapter 2.

¹⁹⁰ Interview with informant 4

¹⁹¹ van der Haar 2001 p 112, and collective interview in Medellin del Carmen, May 8, 2007

naturally, lost his stronghold on them.¹⁹² The state government, in many ways, replaced the patron as the rule-maker, and, in doing so, in many aspects entered into indigenous life in Chiapas for the first time. The relative autonomy of Chiapas, a state ruled by the local ladino elite – the Chiapan Family – was challenged.

To be able to control the ejidos, the Mexican government needed some sort of political organization within the ejidos. With the emergence of the ejidos and formal freedom, the former *mozos* also needed to find ways of organizing themselves, and they had to maintain relations with the federal government. For this purpose, the new ejido system and the corporative state created by Cardenas came to fill the void.

Ejido structure

In order to be accountable for ejido rights, many formal criteria had to be met. The settlement in question had to exist for a minimum of six months prior to the endowment request. The applicant had to be Mexican citizens, be more than 16 years old and male (or a female head of household, meaning a widowed mother). The community needed to gather more than 20 such persons before they were in question for endowment. With these formalities met, the *mozos* could request endowment of the land of the finca to which they belonged.¹⁹³

Every application, once received by the governor, had to be published and communicated to the *Comisión Agraria Mixta* (CAM), the Mixed Agrarian Committee. The latter then decided the amount of land that was to be given to the applicants. Once CAM had had its say, a presidential resolution in the *Diario Oficial* was needed to close the deal, as we have seen in the case of Tabasco. In most cases, by this time the ejido was already populated within the borders set by CAM.¹⁹⁴

As we have also seen in the case of ejido Tabasco, this process was slow. The two years the Tabasqueños had to wait for the execution of their request is not at all bad compared to many other communities.¹⁹⁵

In order to petition for land, the soon-to-be ejidatarios had to form a *Comité Agrario Ejecutivo*. This formal institution was responsible for all contacts with the government in

¹⁹² Actually, even the world of the big patron and his family was limited to the finca. Many of them spoke Tojolabal. The patron and his family were just as scared of the outside world as the *mozos*, except that the former had at least some formal education. (Estrada Saavedra 2007, and van der Haar 2001)

¹⁹³ van der Haar 2001, p 80

¹⁹⁴ Op.cit.

¹⁹⁵ van der Haar gives an account of ejido San Miguel Chibtik. There the inhabitants had to wait for decades before they were granted formal rights to their lands. (van der Haar 2001)

the process of requesting land, and was to be replaced with the *comisariado ejidal* – elected by an ejidal assembly, also a government construction – once the endowment was granted. Thus, this new form of organization replaced the *caporales* of the finca regime. The caporales were caretakers chosen from the peasants working on the fincas. They were in charge of organizing the labour of the mozos on the haciendas, but were always controlled by the patron. Now, with no patron around to make decisions, the *comisariado ejidal* was to be given new responsibilities that far overreached the role of the caporales.

The *comisariado ejidal* is now the highest authority in Tojolabal communities. Given that this form of organization derives directly from government initiatives, this needs a closer discussion. Did the communities accept this form of governance because they saw it fit in the relations with the government? That seems likely, and more so if we accept that the communities felt some kind of gratitude towards the governor and president that helped them in getting their freedom.¹⁹⁶

It seems another key factor in explaining the willingness to accept the new forms of organization was that the newly independent mozos knew very little about how to organize, politically, their new lives in the ejido. When the patron was removed, it seems an institutional vacuum emerged. In the words of Gemma van der Haar:

Coming from a situation of peonage, in their new condition as direct controllers of land, the Tojolabal were in need of a model on which to build their institutions for internal co-ordination and representation to the outside. The ejido provided such a model at least partially.¹⁹⁷

The ejidal assembly elects the *comisariado* and his two “helpers”, the *tesorero* – in charge of the economy, and *secretario* – the referent, for a period of three years. These *comisariados* become *autoridad* – authority, a word used to describe the people who, due to personal skills or official titles, are listened to in the Tojolabal communities. Their power goes far beyond the agrarian issues that the government had in mind while setting up the system, although not in the formal sense. He – it is always a male – holds the power to convoke the people to assembly, and is the outside face of the community in most matters. But his power is constrained by the assembly, which holds the power to withdraw authority as well as bestow it.

¹⁹⁶ See the quote from the interview with informant 4 (Medellin del Carmen) on page 40.

¹⁹⁷ van der Haar 2001, p 131. This is contrary to the assumption made by many of the scholars who claim that the Zapatistas, as they were gaining strength from the late 1980s, adapted the “original indigenous” way of organizing assemblies and electing leaders. It is, however, possible to find reasons for the rapid acceptance by the indigenous peoples of the new political structures in comparing the new structure to the older traditions of the indigenous cultures in Mesoamerica. This is a point that Carlos Lenkersdorf, among others, makes in trying to explain the democratic and historical nature of the Zapatista way of organizing their *bases de apoyo* – support bases. (Lenkersdorf 1999)

The government demands we assemble once a month, but we meet at least two or three times a month, due to necessities in the community. It has always been like that. The authority holds the word, he has information he wants to share with us. Afterwards the people get to speak. Everybody who wants, speaks, they just ask to speak. Or they are asked to speak, the ones with good minds and good hearts. It is very democratic... Sometimes we vote, other times we reach consensus. The authority asks us to vote.¹⁹⁸

The assembly makes it possible for the right-holders – the ejiditarios – to exercise control over land tenure and over individual members. “Right-holders define what a “right” entails, condition membership, co-ordinate duties and enforce sanctions.”¹⁹⁹

Although being an authority means great honour as well as power – maybe even more than what is democratically sane, it is not easy to find those willing to hold the position. In the words of Eduardo Lopez Mendez and Augusto Mendez Lopez:

The assembly chooses the authority. If there is more than one candidate, we vote by lifting our hands. It is common that nobody want to be authority, it is not paid work. So the assembly has to pick one. We have to ask the wife, not only the candidate. She can say no, that the husband has to work the land, that she cannot cope alone...²⁰⁰

In ejido Tabasco, all grown men (above the age of 16), not only the right holders, gather in the assembly. The women do not participate. “The women do not participate in the assembly, they have their own. They discuss what they need... money for the stores, medicine... They also have authorities. They are chosen the same way.”²⁰¹

Before we close this subchapter, a short note on who is eligible and who is not for positions of authority in the Tojolabal communities: The tesorero has to know how to read and write, and keep track of the money. Other than that, you are only required to be a grown man, claim Eduardo Lopez Mendez and Augusto Mendez Lopez.²⁰² That is not totally true. Status is important in Tojolabal communities, and such status is achieved through, among other things, education and holding positions. The two often walk hand in hand, and is not for everyone to grab. We will look in greater detail on this power structure when we discuss the role played by the *catequistas*, the Catholic Church representatives in the indigenous communities in Chiapas, in the next chapter. The catequistas are trained lay teachers, schooled in the basics of Catholic dogmas, social organizing and first aid etcetc by the Catholic Church.

¹⁹⁸ Interview with informant 16

¹⁹⁹ van der Haar 2001, p 133

²⁰⁰ Interview with informant 16

²⁰¹ Interview with informant 16

²⁰² Interview with informant 16

A de facto local government

The government model of organization in ejidos says that only the ones with rights as ejiditarios assemble, but praxis is, as we have seen, that all adult men gather to discuss issues concerning the community – all issues, not only land tenure and issues concerning relations with the government. In fact, the assembly can be said to constitute a de facto local government.

[It is] the totality of inhabitants of a settlement that, gathered in a meeting, dictate the norms that govern every sphere of local social life. For example, the meeting programs, the work in the communal milpa, the construction of public buildings, and creating or cleaning footpaths; and it designates civil and religious authorities.²⁰³

As is true for the other aspects of ejido organization in ejido Tabasco, this function of the assembly was established in the early phases of the system, in the 1940s.

This de facto status of the assembly and the comisariado ejidal as a local government has gradually grown into a position that is not in the interest of the Mexican government, and has paved the way for a sort of autonomy that later will be used against the very same state institutions that imposed this organizational structure. But from the 1940s up to the 1980s it served as a means to get stable voters for the official party (PRI), as well as to organize the new agricultural project of Cardenas.

But what could the government expect? Once thrown into a world of the unknown, it was only natural that the Tojolabales chose to organize around the structure offered to them by the government. But in a world where there suddenly was no patron and the need to redefine the identity was urgent, it is equally natural that this form of organizational structure would be taken further than the government had intended.²⁰⁴

The ejido is today considered to be part of Tojolabal tradition by the Tabasqueños. It thus seems that the Cardenista scheme hit the nail on the head. The fact that this form of organization was as widespread as it came to be, proves that, once “alone” in the world, the Tojolabales were eagerly grasping outside guidance in order to find their own way.²⁰⁵ But at the same time, seeing as the ejido was rapidly adapted as a traditional way of life, it also proves that the Tojolabales were quick to adapt to new forms of life and self-governing. It

²⁰³ Leyva & Ascencio 1996

²⁰⁴ This is even clearer when looking at other communities, who chose, or were forced, to move to the Lacandon jungle in the process of leaving the fincas. In the jungle they had to colonize and cultivate what had been known as the Lacandon desert for centuries. Here, they had to construct brand new communities. It is, then, quite easy to grasp that the new ejido structure came to play an important role in the construction of identity in these jungle communities.

²⁰⁵ This is not the same as saying that the Indians (using the pejorative word on purpose) cannot manage on their own. Years and years of coercion is not something you rid yourself off in a second.

is also plausible that the collective way of reaching agreements and making decisions felt natural and not too far away from earlier forms of organization.

[The ejido] works as an environment of protection against the outside world, and a bastion for the intra-communal autonomy... As opposed to the regional government, that had the Tojolabales excluded from power until recent years, the farmers “exercise a strict internal control in their community”... Thus, notwithstanding the detailed juridical regulation that allowed the agrarian authorities to intervene in ejidal life, the reach and control of the latter is more limited than it might look, due to the fact that the legal norms are redefined locally by the feeling of membership and property of the lands as well as Tojolabal praxis, experience and beliefs.²⁰⁶

Even though, as we have seen, the ejido structure was accepted by every known Tojolabal community, a mutual identity across the different community borders did not develop. Being Tojolabal was of great importance, but inter-community cooperation and organization was not pre-eminent.

Life in the new ejido

The following sequence is an account by a government engineer visiting ejido Tabasco in 1960:

The ejiditarios use the terrain to cultivate maize and beans, and, to a lesser extent, to cultivate coffee. The lands not used for cultivation are the grassing areas of the animals. The ejido is supplied by the river called Rio Medellin, that passes close to the populated area. The main centres of consumption of their products are Las Margaritas and Comitán, the former some 20 kilometres away, the latter 45. The ejido has no streets. The indigenous people of the ejido speak the Shol dialect (sic) needing the use of interpreters as their Spanish is very bad. Their clothing consists of pants and shirts without pockets.²⁰⁷

Thus, in order to get to their markets, the nearest towns of Las Margaritas and Comitán, the hike for the Tojolabales in ejido Tabasco was a tough one. There was no other transport available than walking, using mules for transportation of heavy goods. “You would leave at one o’clock in the morning to get to Comitán, and you would not be home before late the following night.”²⁰⁸ And people had to go there, to sell their coffee and meat and what was left of the beans (most of it went to self-consumption), and to buy whatever could not be gotten in ejido Tabasco. When they were still *mozos*, the goods had to be brought to Comitán because that was where the patron had his city household. After the creation of ejido Tabasco the travel to the local market got somewhat easier – now they could go to

²⁰⁶ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 172

²⁰⁷ Quoted in Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 111. It is worth noting that the good engineer, criticizing the Tabasqueños knowledge of the Spanish language, fails to identify the native tongue in Tabasco as Tojolabal – he claims they speak “shol”, a different Mayan dialect found in other areas of Chiapas (and dialect as well as ethnicity is known by the name “Chol”, not “Shol”). This proves, if nothing else, the arrogant manner with which the local government treated the indigenous population, even in the 1960s.

²⁰⁸ Interview with informant 13

Las Margaritas, half the distance.²⁰⁹ But still: Going to the doctor or getting your child baptized – basically every operation that included doing something out of the ordinary (working the land, sleeping and eating) meant going to Las Margaritas. Even as late as 1988, ejido Tabasco offered the following facilities;

Incomplete Primary School Building... Most of the schools in the area are incomplete. These communities do not have means of communication: Telephone; Telegraph; Mail. In this sense they are totally without communication. In emergencies they use the radio transmitters established in: The City of Las Margaritas: *XEVFS La voz de la frontera sur* [the voice of the southern frontier]...²¹⁰

In 1960, 140 people were living in the ejido; 63 men and 77 women.²¹¹ These 140 souls had requested their ejido being expanded one year earlier, due to the eternal problem of not having enough lands to work. It would take 10 years to get the extension, and only in 1980 was the problem solved for good.

In the preparation for the extension of the terrains in ejido Tabasco, the *Cuerpo Consultivo Agrario* – the agrarian consultant committee – noted the following about ejido:

... a total of 161 inhabitants, of which 37 are heads of the household, of which only three do not have rights to land; 17 single men above the age of 16; two women with rights to land, thus making a total of 22 capacitated persons with 84 heads of big kettle, 90 small ones and 222 poultry.²¹²

The inhabitants cultivated – as have done throughout the whole ejidal history of Tabasco – corn, beans, bananas, coffee and different fruits, as well as the above mentioned small scale animal farming. Most of this went, at least until the above mentioned extension of the terrain, to self-consumption, but the coffee and the fruit was, in large parts, sold at the market in Las Margaritas.

Working with the former patron, paid work at seasonal level, was still an important source of income for most ejidos in Chiapas and Las Margaritas, but the former *mozos* of ejido Tabasco chose not to work with Javier Solís, the former *Mayordomo* and since 1946 the owner of Medellín. Solís was, according to the *Tabasqueños*, abusive, and they had also sworn never to enter work relations with the patron – any patron – again.²¹³ This seems an exaggeration. The *Tabasqueños* did work with the patron as late as the 1980s,

²⁰⁹ Interview with informant 13, and field observation on the bus to ejido Tabasco, May 2007

²¹⁰ Banco de datos Fortam-CEM, 1988 ()

²¹¹ National census 1960 (INEGI). Ten years earlier, only 118 people (50 men, 68 women) populated Tabasco, as opposed to, as mentioned earlier, 130 in 1940 (65 / 65). I have not been able to find out what reduced the number of men by such a relevant number of inhabitants in the ten years between 1940 and – 50. (INEGI)

²¹² Quoted in Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 112

²¹³ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 109, and interviews with informants 2 and 3

when the new owner of La Floresta, Efrén Bañuelos Ríos offered them double the pay, raising the daily payment from five to ten pesos.²¹⁴

There was a school in ejido Tabasco (the same incomplete primary school building mentioned on the previous page), and the children did attend. But normally not for long, as this account by Eduardo López Méndez, one of the best educated in ejido Tabasco today and a holder of a most prestigious position clearly indicates:

I was born in 1954... Little by little, the level of education was elevated. With the very limited help that the government offered, we could finish third grade. The little we learned gave us inspiration to do something for the community... Yes, we have had a primary school here, but we never got to finish it. I never reached sixth grade, for instance. Never got further than third grade.²¹⁵

Lack of money, too many mouths to feed and the need for more hands working the land hindered the education of Tojolabal children. There are, however, stories of leaders in different communities “making it big”, either by joining some lower regional leaders or by subjugating his whole community – the so-called cacique. In trying to gain more land rights, many Tojolabal communities sent people to the state capital of Tuxtla, or even to Mexico City, or they hired lawyers. Ejido Tabasco did both.²¹⁶ Being responsible for the contact with the outside world gave access to power abuse, and there are many known cases of it. We will look at this aspect of the new social leadership emerging and the inherent dangers of power abuse in the indigenous communities in the next chapter.

Leaving behind a vacuum to be filled by other actors

As I have shown, the social aspects of the Cardenista project were abandoned in the 1940s. Even as the president Lázaro Cárdenas never really challenged the great landowners, repatriation of land in the decades following his presidency did even less to change the power structure in Chiapas. Redistribution of land went on, but hardly at the cost of private property – mostly national lands and the Lacandon jungle were given to the applicants for ejido land.²¹⁷ And the ejidos were basically left to themselves, only given some rights when complaining, and used as voters in the election process, local as national. “In those days, PRI was the only alternative. There was no other party”, says Eduardo López Méndez.²¹⁸ In the words of historian Antonio García de León:

²¹⁴ RPP: La Floresta 1348, 1st section, 1998 book VI, and interview with informant 2

²¹⁵ Interview with informant 13

²¹⁶ Interview with informant 13

²¹⁷ García de León 2002

²¹⁸ Interview with informant 13. He is talking about the post-war period, up to the 1980s.

[The Party elites] considered the farming classes... their own creation, a class tied to this by multiple mechanisms of subordination, loyalty and “thankfulness”, which had to be proven in every election... The old fears of the Zapata general Rafael Cal y Mayor... that the redistribution process was nothing but a simple lollypop to control the farming classes, were proven to be extremely accurate.²¹⁹

The indigenous farmers needed credit to be able to cultivate in an efficient manner. Thus they got even more dependent of the party that gave them, at times, what was needed to survive. The Chiapan countryside was reduced to not much more than a means to winning elections and a good place to produce coffee and hold cattle. The federal state removed itself from Chiapas, leaving the state at the will of local leaders such as the infamous state governor Absalon Castellanos (1983-88) and the big landowners, who often were the same people.²²⁰ This absence of an efficient, balanced governing body left a vacuum that soon was to be filled by other actors.²²¹

That the former *mozos* owned their lands did not mean that they were free to live a life out of reach of the landowners. The ejiditarios in ejido Tabasco applied for an extension of their terrain in 1959, an extension that would affect the patron of (the remaining parts of) the finca Medellin, as well as the lands of a neighbouring ejido of fellow Tojolabales. The build-up to the formal application was not without drama, and exemplifies the power (and lack of such) of the landowner over the ejiditarios, as well as the – at least some times – tense relationship between the two:

And the *cabron* [bastard] landowner knew we were in the process of trying to get more land... He came to kill the comisariados, he came to kill us. But the comisariados did not die, because his father took the bullet for him... But the people got scared, and chose not to go on with the process. This was in 1958, I think.²²²

Extending the terrain and internal division

We have seen that inter-community identity was not widespread in Tojolabal Chiapas in the first decades after the Cardenista reforms. One of the reasons for this was the struggle for land. The Tabasqueño’s request for more ejido lands, leading to armed struggle from the landowner as we have seen above, may serve as an example.

November 24, 1959: The Tabasqueños needed more terrain. They made a request for an expansion of the ejido, applying for a total of 904 hectares more. They would have to wait almost ten years to get the extension. On February 9, 1968, they did the provisional move,

²¹⁹ García de Leon 2002, p 78

²²⁰ The Chiapan Family has been mentioned The Castellanos has been one of the more influential ones over the last 160 years.

²²¹ García de Leon 2002, and Estrada Saavedra 2007. It is worth noting that even though the landowners – the former *patrones* – lost power with the Cardenista reforms, they still remained a local power in Chiapas. The big fincas were reduced to smaller farms, but they still were bigger than the small lands that were given to the ejiditarios.

²²² Interview with informant 2. The informant is mixing the years, it seems – the formal process, at least, of applying for more land did not start until the following year, 1959.

according to the official documents. June 16, 1969, the president sealed the deal by signing the request, and a month later, July 14, 1969, it was published in the *Diario Oficial*.²²³

Ejido Tabasco was only extended by 659 hectares. The remaining 245 hectares in the application were already occupied by the neighbouring ejido of La Morelia, also Tojolabal. This led to years of discussion and argument between the two communities. December 6, 1980, sees the Tabasqueños sign, at last, the handover document. In this document relations with neighbouring La Morelia are discussed, and the remaining 245 hectares are accepted as lost to ejido Tabasco.²²⁴

There is no historical hostility in ejido Tabasco towards the neighbours in ejido Morelia.²²⁵ That was not always the case in post-war Chiapas. As mentioned above, there never really existed any inter-community ties other than the “being Tojolabal”. From the 1940s, the lack of such an identity could even turn into hostility. This was due to the patron-client relationship with the authorities as well. We have barely mentioned the need for credits, which would be too complicated to go into. But with limited access to land and money, looking at neighbouring communities as rivals is not hard to understand.²²⁶ The very same structure that tied the bond between government (patron) and farmers (clients) did also create divisions among the latter.

The quarrel between La Morelia and ejido Tabasco never escalated into conflict. But mutual organization was not on the table. Friendships existed between inhabitants of the different ejidos, if only because male members of different communities would socialize²²⁷ when meeting on the markets in Las Margaritas and Comitán. But it seems that a combination of consolidating the structure of the ejido, fighting for the existing government means and the lack of any overall identity, or at least an ideology that could make use of such an identity, the Tojolabales of la Cañada de Soledad first and foremost based their lives around the ejido – granted a Tojolabal ejido, where ethnic and cultural aspects of being Tojolabal were important features in every day life – more than on whatever mutual interests they must have had with their fellow Tojolabales in other ejidos.

²²³ RAN 07 52 04, 1959: 01 – 09, and DOF, June 14, 1969. The presidential resolution granted more land to the Tabasqueños than did the governor’s motion in 1960: the 245 hectares suggested by the local authorities augmented to 904 hectares with the presidential resolution.

²²⁴ RAN 07 52 04, 1969: 01 – 08

²²⁵ I base this on my interviews. That proves, at least, that relations are good between the two today.

²²⁶ Even more serious was the inter-communitary divide between the already settled ejidos and newly arrived applicants. This, however, was not that important in the region around Tabasco, where lands were normally distributed between already settled former *mozos*. This was rather a problem in the mentioned newly settled communities in the Lacandon jungle. (van der Haar 2001)

²²⁷ Meaning, as I will show in the next chapter, drinking booze and beer together.

This was about to change when another outside agent filled some of the void left open by the returning Cardenista reforms.

Another point worth noting is that, in the before-mentioned handover document, signed in 1980 (due to the conflict with La Morelia mentioned above), 22 out of the total 28 signatures by the inhabitants of ejido Tabasco are written in Latin letters. Only 6 are finger stamps. This as opposed to the first handover document, from the original redistribution in 1939, where 100 % of the signatures were finger stamps. Even in 1959, in the request for the lands that were handed over some ten years later, only four of the signatures are in Latin letters. Something had happened, obviously, in the period between 1959 and 1980. This we will focus on in the following chapter.

Chapter 5: The word of God comes to the Tojolabal communities

We barely touched in the former chapter the way the ejiditarios, in ejido Tabasco and other places, depended on outsiders – lawyers and politicians – to get their land and to apply for the different programs of credit that the PRI government offered. This was in large parts due to a situation in which the ejiditarios knew little about how to behave in the “outside” world – they were still “cultural mozos”, notwithstanding the fact that they now had papers proving their rightful ownership of land, and that they were, strictly speaking, their own masters.

There are many examples of lawyers and government officials taking advantage of this situation. The ejiditarios worked the land, in many cases barely surviving on what their milpa gave them, and had neither time to apply for help on their own nor the knowledge to do so. The little they sold on the market – in the case of ejido Tabasco in Las Margaritas or, to a lesser extent, in Comitán – did not offer the opportunity to save money for more than a visit to the doctor or buying the absolutely necessary medicine. Coming up with the necessary money to finance travelling to Tuxtla Gutierrez or Mexico City to talk to the relevant authorities was often difficult. This is an account from the ejido of San José Nueva Esperanza, probably about something that occurred in the late 1960s or early 1970s, also in Las Margaritas, that shows that this was of little concern to the bureaucrats of la Reforma agraria:

When the last government official came, offering to speed up the paperwork, he asked for 10 000 pesos... He settled with five or six thousand. He said that if we did not give him the money, we would never see the paperwork solved.²²⁸

This situation lasted until the late 1960s or, in the case of ejido Tabasco, the early 1970s. In the words of Eduardo Lopez Mendez, born in the early 1950s:

A group of us, young people, said no!, we will do things ourselves. Our fathers have suffered a lot, but without really accomplishing much. So we left the *licenciados* [a university title. Lopez Mendez is here talking about educated Hispanics] to themselves, and with them their lawyers, and started our own fight, making headway. Maybe that way we could get somewhere. Because the lawyers... we gave them money to fight for us, but nothing happened. This way, little by little, we managed to change things.²²⁹

I finished the last chapter showing how most of the people in ejido Tabasco had learned to write their names sometime between 1959 and 1980. The quote from Eduardo Lopez Mendez is part of the same development: the former mozos, used to living at the mercy of

²²⁸ Interview in nearby ejido San Jose, quoted in Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 153

²²⁹ Interview with informant 13

the patron or, after he left, at that of the bureaucrats and other powerful, mainly hispanic, men, were adapting to the new life in a new world.

Something had happened. The reformed Catholic Church had come to Las Margaritas, and ejido Tabasco. Or, more correct: *La palabra de Dios* – the Word of God, that is the way the Tojolabales themselves denominate the way the Diocese of San Cristobal, inspired by the *en vogue* theory of Liberation Theology, got in contact with the indigenous communities of Chiapas in the late 1960s and early -70s – had arrived. That was to change a lot in the lives of the ejiditarios in Tabasco. “In 1972 or -73... when La palabra de Dios came to the ejido, we opened our eyes somewhat more,” explains Eduardo Lopez Mendez, one of the first catequistas in ejido Tabasco.²³⁰ The catequista was an invention of the Diocese of San Cristobal. They trained indigenous men to be lay religious teachers. The catequistas were initially intended as a means to spread the word of God in the sparsely populated Tojolabal region (and other regions of the diocese), and to compensate for the lack of priests in the region. But as time went on, the institution was to influence far beyond the strictly religious world, as we will see.²³¹

We have seen how the Tabasqueños got their formal freedom and how they gained ownership to their own land. We will see how the Catholic Church in Chiapas, lead by Samuel Ruiz Garcia, the bishop of the diocese of San Cristobal, and his priests and co-workers in *La Castalia* – a Catholic brotherhood in Comitan – entered the world of the Tojolabales, and with them the Liberation Theology.

The creation of La opcion por los pobres

Samuel Ruiz became bishop in San Cristobal in 1959. He was an orthodox, conservative man of God in his early years as bishop, but seeing the poverty and misery of the indigenous people of Chiapas made him realize that these people needed more than just the word of God and to attend mass and be buried in Christian soil.²³² With his changing view, Ruiz was to change the lives of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas in a substantial manner. Allying himself with the emerging concept of liberation through theology, a movement that was gaining strength all around the world and in particular in Latin-America at the time, he

²³⁰ Interview with informant 13. This informant, Eduardo Lopez Mendez, has climbed in the extra-clerical hierarchy of the Catholic Church, and is today deacon.

²³¹ “The training of indigenous catechists who took on social and political roles in their communities that extended well beyond preparing people to receive sacraments was an imperative move in respecting communities' ability to create their own path to liberation.” (Kovic 2005)

²³² Morales Bermúdez 2005. This is how Ruiz himself explains his change of heart.

redefined the very concept of being a catholic servant of God in Chiapas.²³³ Ruiz and his reformed diocese of San Cristobal were to focus on the "option for the poor and the liberation of the oppressed", with active insertion of "the social reality, in history and incarnation in the indigenous cultures."²³⁴

The personal evolution of bishop Ruiz is not the subject of study in this thesis, but with him his diocese changed. It is therefore possible to see the development of the bishops outlooks as the development of the Catholic church in the indigenous areas of Chiapas. One of the main features of the project the bishop was central in creating was the education of the *catequistas*. The title was used to describe the (male) indigenous young people who got a – rather basic, at least initially – education in bible studies, first aid, craftsmanship, agrarian laws and economics, and who were to function as the prolonged hand of the Diocese in the indigenous communities.

We started a process of formation. We did not know what to call the results of that formation; the Tojolabales called it *Monoman*. It would be like a sort of promoter. In Spanish, the name catequista got stuck, even though they are not really catechists [in the traditional sense of the word. My aggr].²³⁵

The first schools for capacitating catequistas were established in 1961, in the towns of Bachajón, San Cristobal and Comitán. In Comitán, the brotherhood *Los Maristas* was the first institution to establish this kind of education. They were soon accompanied by La Castalia. Two periods stand out in the relationship between the Catholic Church and the indigenous Chiapan population:

1961 – 1968

This first period is characterized by attempt of generating development through outside guidance, according to sociologist Marco Estrada Saavedra.²³⁶ In this first period, the church can be said to have a paternalistic approach to the Indian subjects.²³⁷ In these years, the church picked the candidates for the catequista education without asking what the Tojolabal communities themselves thought about the matter. Classes were given in a traditional way, focusing on the message of the bible as a means to get to paradise. Thus, one can say that the catequistas were educated in preaching the gospel to his fellow

²³³ Important renovations in catholic theology came after the Vatican Council in 1965 and the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Columbia, in 1968. (Morales Bermúdez 2005)

²³⁴ In Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 185

²³⁵ Interview with informant 7

²³⁶ Estrada Saavedra 2007

²³⁷ Op.cit, p 190

ejiditarios upon returning from the three to six months of classes in, mainly in the case of the Tojolabales, San Cristobal.

Thus, as is to be expected, the church members tutoring the indigenous youth did not possess a great knowledge of the people they were supposed to educate. Although an initial attempt to help improving the life of the indigenous subjects, the relationship between church and the different indigenous peoples of Chiapas was not very different from the way it had been starting with the arrival of the Spanish. In the words of padre Ramon Castillo at La Castalia: “[This was] in 1963. Don Samuel, the bishop, installed some nuns here, specialists in “Indian Christianity”. At that time, it was all about Indians, not about Tojolabales, Choles etc.”²³⁸

Samuel Ruiz wanted to christen the indigenous, in a way the goal was to “westernise” them so that they could get on the gravy train of modernization.²³⁹

Seeing as the period of interest for this chapter lies beyond this first period, I will continue to the next one without touching the details of the years before 1968, when the formation of the catequistas went through important changes and, a few years later, was to influence life in ejido Tabasco. In the mid-1960s²⁴⁰, the diocese of San Cristobal was split in six administrative regions, based on the culture and linguistic characteristics of each region. The region of interest in this thesis is the *Zona sureste* – the southeast region of the diocese, where virtually all Tojolabal speaking ejidos and communities are located, including, of course, ejido Tabasco.²⁴¹

1969 and beyond

It is not coincidental that an important change in the pastoral work of the diocese of San Cristobal took place in 1968, the year of the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellin, Columbia. Here the frameworks for a decade of hegemony for the Liberation theology were laid down. Liberation theology intends to relate Christianity or more correct: Catholicism, to political activism. Even though the movement, if such a word is correct, had its written theory and intellectual vanguard, the preeminent aspect is the organization of church practice through the model of a sort of Christian based community, or, as Marco

²³⁸ Interview with informant 7. Padre Ramon Castillo uses the Spanish word *indios*, not *indigenas*, here to prove a point, thus the translation *Indians* instead of *indigenous*.

²³⁹ Of course, the Tojolabales and all indigenous tribes were already Christians, as we have seen.

²⁴⁰ Castillo Aguilar 1999. This happened in 1966, to be precise.

²⁴¹ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 186. The other regions are: zona chol, zona centro, zona Tzotsil and zona Tzeltal. There is a remarkable accordance between these administrative regions of the diocese and the Zapatista stronghold in the 1990s. We will get back to this in chapter 7.

Estrada Saavedra puts it; *La civita Christi*. The philosophy behind the project was never really what mattered the most in the Tojolabal region, at least not according to Padre Ramon Castillo:

We never really knew much about the theology and philosophy and that word *en vogue* in those time... Dialectics. We just did what felt right, in a mutual understanding with the Tojolabales, we responded to their need and wishes.²⁴²

Not withstanding the organic development of the project, it is worthwhile to look into the theoretic framework in some detail before we move on, seeing as the reformed diocese of San Cristobal is to play a major part, always present, as this paper moves on. The church of Samuel Ruiz was considered so radical that the bishop himself was accused of being a Zapatista leader immediately after the 1994 uprising. In accordance with Liberation theology, the diocese of San Cristobal changed. The vertical relationship between church and subjects was strongly criticized by many of the younger ministers and priests. Even the word of God had to be viewed critically; would it not be possible to adjust it, or at least its meaning, so that it also spoke to the indigenous peoples in Chiapas, so far away from Jerusalem both in time and distance? In other words: Would it be possible to create a truly universal church?²⁴³ To evangelize people based on its needs in their own culture – from the perspective of this very culture? With the administrative reorganization mentioned above, and now even a critical look on its own praxis, the church of Samuel Ruiz was ready to change life in indigenous Chiapas in a qualitative way. We will now see how this reorganisation, spiritual as well as profane, worked in reality, in La Castalia, Comitán.

La Castalia

La Castalia was established in Comitán in 1967. The diocese of San Cristobal wanted to get in closer touch with the Tojolabales of the newly established Zona Sureste: “In 1967, the sisters who came here [to La Castalia] started going to the communities, not knowing what they were, they just accepted the invitations they got from the parish of Las Margaritas.”²⁴⁴ Upon seeing that the former work (in what I have defined as the period from 1961-1968) did not really carry the desired results, the Diocese changed its way of relating to the indigenous communities; they started going out to actively listen to the needs in the communities. This coincided with the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Medellín in 1968, where the poverty question and the role of the church in that field had

²⁴² Interview with informant 7

²⁴³ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 191

²⁴⁴ Interview with informant 7

been on the table. The newfound Catholic radicalism that came to light in Medellin gave the Diocese the necessary framework to look for a more direct way of interacting with the indigenous peoples on many fields.²⁴⁵ “From that moment on we started to uncover what happened, how life was here. We started to work this region, getting to know that the people were Tojolabales,” as Padre Ramon Castillo explains.²⁴⁶

The Catholic Church had been an important factor of power in Chiapas from the days of the Spanish conquest, and, with a few exceptions, always supporting the stronger part; the hispanic ruling class. This caused the Tojolabales to be cautious, if not sceptical and negative, towards the church. Little by little, the new ways of the church was to break the mistrust.

I got here in 1971, thinking of the gospel in the traditional way... But I found, in the Tojolabal communities, that nobody bothered with us when we got to the ejidos. The earlier priest never used to go to ejidos, and if they went, they stayed in la Casa Grande [where the patron and his family lived].²⁴⁷

In accordance with the new gospel of the church of liberation, La Castalia staff had to learn that matter comes before mind, at least in the desperate situation they found in the Tojolabal communities of the Zona sureste:

And when we got there, to my first community, an epidemic had broken out. So no one [among the inhabitants of the community] bothered with us. “Now what?” I asked the sisters. “Now we attend the sick, the gospel must wait!” they told me...²⁴⁸

Padre Ramon Castillo also learned that he had to change the way he was preaching the very gospel. During the sermons, the clergy found that the indigenous were paying attention, but not in the way one would expect:

They related everything to their own lives, to their own tradition... They have the water cult, and they have the cult of the cross. And they are mixed... Our message did not come through. But then they started inviting us, into their lives and ceremonies. And we learned to be Indians...²⁴⁹

This, that the ministers “learned to be Indians”, may explain why the Father and the Sisters of La Castalia managed to play the role they were to play in the history of the Tojolabales and, in particular, ejido Tabasco, as we will see. For the first time, the

²⁴⁵ Morales Bermúdez 2005. It is possible to object to this positive description of the church’ attempts to establish close relations with the indigenous. Did it happen out of necessity, in a world that was rapidly changing, so that the Catholic Church had to find its new base in the outskirts of modernity? And did not the church only establish itself as the new patron on top of the existing hierarchy? The first question will not be answered in this paper. As to the latter, this will be discussed when we see, later in this chapter, how the communities responded to the arrival of the Protestant churches that became an important factor in the region from around the 1980s.

²⁴⁶ Interview with informant 7

²⁴⁷ Interview with informant 7

²⁴⁸ Interview with informant 7

²⁴⁹ Interview with informant 7

Tojolabales met hispanics that really made an effort to understand them.²⁵⁰ In the words of Padre Ramon Castillo: “We never learned, in school, the Liberation theology. But it came natural, being with the Tojolabales. This happened everywhere in Don Samuels mission.”²⁵¹

For the first time, getting to learn the native language was considered necessary for the clergy, where before speaking indigenous language had been left to the arbitrary Fathers and sisters themselves. Now, all the ministers learned the native tongue.²⁵²

The encounter with ejido Tabasco

According to the people of ejido Tabasco, La palabra de Dios first came to the region in Lomantan, a Tojolabal community in the kilometres from ejido Tabasco. Some of the young men in Lomantan had gone to study in San Cristobal. They came back carrying a message of hope for the Tojolabales. Eduardo Lopez Mendez was one of the first Tabasqueños to get in contact with the new, radical church and its messengers. He explains how he first heard of this new direction:

Because of their [the newly educated catequistas from Lomantan] enthusiasm, the word was spread, they travelled around and spoke to the other communities. First came the catequistas from Lomantan, and shortly after that the priests started coming to the communities... in 1974, I left to study La palabra de Dios in La Castalia.²⁵³

Eduardo Lopez Mendez was, together with two other young men, the first catequista in ejido Tabasco. Of course, the Catholic Church had been present in ejido Tabasco before that, but always “siding” with the patron, leaving some religious functions to him²⁵⁴ and always staying with the patron when going on one of the sporadic visits.²⁵⁵

According to Padre Ramon Castillo, the first contact La Castalia ever made with ejido Tabasco was through a man called Jose Gomez, catequista in ejido Saltillo in the same region. Jose Gomez invited the Padre to visit the community.

²⁵⁰ I have seen to what degree the people of La Castalia have adapted to the Tojolabal way during religious ceremonies. During mass, they all pray, even the representative of the Holy Church of Rome (in this case Padre Ramon Castillo) facing each corner of the church building – east, west, north and south, to pay homage to nature and the gods in everything. When the Padre finishes his sermon, he gives the word to one of the congregants to reflect on the word of the day, often connecting it to a recent experience in the community. (Field observation in ejido Tabasco, June 2007)

²⁵¹ Interview with informant 7

²⁵² Interview with informant 7

²⁵³ Interview with informant 13

²⁵⁴ See chapter 3, on how the patron could marry people and throw religious feasts

²⁵⁵ See interview with informant 7 above, on how the Tojolabales did not believe he was a priest seeing as he ate and lived with them, or this quote from the same interview: “The former priest always came to visit Tabasco through the patron, staying with him...”

In Tabasco they [the church representatives that had visited the ejido before] would stay in the patrons house, Medellin... But I wanted to live with the Tojolabales. They did not believe I was Padre, therefore.²⁵⁶

The encounter with ejido Tabasco was an encounter with a struggling, dependant community, says Padre Ramon Castillo. “They were very modest people, dependant of the patron, Cesar Solis. They were poor. They were quiet. But they named their own catequistas... [This happened] in 1973, or 1974.”²⁵⁷

Because of the bad communications, the church people had to walk to get to ejidos such as Tabasco.²⁵⁸ Thus, the Fathers and Sisters stayed for a long time in every community, or the catequistas had to stay for weeks in La Castalia in Comitan to get their education. In the late 1970s, the catequistas in ejido Tabasco started giving classes on their own in the community, at times assisted by the people from La Castalia. This was, of course, the whole idea behind the catequista education – making easier the contact between the indigenous in their communities and the church, as well as always having a representative of God present in the communities.²⁵⁹ That was necessary from a strictly religious point of view, as this quote from Padre Ramon Castillo and Sister Catalina Damian indicates: “When we got there, they prayed the Rosario and that’s it, more or less. But after we arrived, they started making reflections on the bible. And they started washing.”²⁶⁰

The Tabasqueños also remember changing upon the arrival of La palabra de Dios, even though they remember more religiousness than do the La Castalia workers:

Before we had catequistas, before La palabra de Dios, the custom was... We had a sister, a *Rezadora* – a prayer lady – who prayed according to her memory, not using the bible. The women were singing and praying with her. Then the catequistas from Lomantan came... But they could not stay here, so we had to name our own catequistas [this happened in 1974].²⁶¹

Before we move on to the more strictly social significance of the contact between ejido Tabasco and La Castalia, I would like to mention a few “archaic” phenomenon that deserve being addressed. The encounter between the Catholic Church and ejido Tabasco gives us an opportunity to briefly touch on some important cultural features of Tojolabal life that were major obstacles in the process of creating the Civita Cristi.

²⁵⁶ Interview with informant 7

²⁵⁷ Interview with informant 7

²⁵⁸ The road was just a gravel one, with barely room for one car at the time, and impossible to drive in the rainy season. This lasted until the early 1980s, when the road going east from Las Margaritas towards the Lacandon jungle was paved and extended due to the necessities of oil workers from national oil company Pemex. (Estrada Saavedra 2007)

²⁵⁹ Interview with informant 7

²⁶⁰ Interview with informant 15

²⁶¹ Interview with informant 16

Brujeria – witchcraft

We have seen how the Tojolabales of ejido Tabasco and elsewhere were forced to live on the fincas of the finca belt until the Cardenista reforms gave them right to landownership in the ejido structure. We have, in passing, said that some cultural aspects survived the centuries of *La colonia* and life on the finca. Some of these features still were in use when La Castalia came in contact with ejido Tabasco. One of them was the belief in witchcraft – *Brujeria*. Although not as strong in the region of ejido Tabasco as in other parts (the reason for that will be discussed in the next paragraphs), the custom was present even in ejido Tabasco in the 1970s, as this quote from Padre Ramon Castillo tell us: “They had witch doctors and killed people due to superstition, for being “bad” people, witches. Even children.”²⁶²

The Tabasqueños themselves also recognize that the custom was alive until the 1970s: “In those days, the Brujeria existed... They would accuse people of being witches, of eating human beings. But La palabra de Dios changed that. It made us rethink our customs.”²⁶³ Still, Brujeria was never as strong in la Cañada de Soledad as in other regions of Chiapas.²⁶⁴ One reason for this may be that this region never was the scene for rebellions by the indigenous, thus not making the patron look for ways to create conflict among the mozos by accusing the social leaders of witchcraft. This is known to have happened in other regions in Chiapas.²⁶⁵ Brujeria has not been seen – in ejido Tabasco, at least – after the arrival of La palabra de Dios in the 1970s.

Bolo – drunkenness

Another feature that the Diocese representatives in La Cañada de Soledad and the Tojolabales of ejido Tabasco tried to change in mutual struggle was the ever-present alcoholism in the indigenous communities.

In ejido Tabasco and the neighbouring communities, the men used to go to Las Margaritas on Saturdays to buy and sell the little merchandise they had to commercialize. Normally, because of the long walk – as we have seen, communications were poor – they would need to spend the night in the town of Las Margaritas, returning to their ejido

²⁶² Interview with informant 15

²⁶³ Interview with informant 16

²⁶⁴ Interviews with informants 7 and 13

²⁶⁵ Castillo Aguilar 2004. As we have seen, landowners tried to hinder the loss of work force on the fincas. The landowners looked for ways to maintain things as they had always been, using the tools available. There are several accounts of this happening regarding accusations of witchcraft. (Interview with informant 7, and Humberto Ruz & Gomez Hernandez 1992)

Sunday night. It was part of the weekend customs to spend Saturday night in Las Margaritas drinking – in times of good sales beer, otherwise homebrewed liquor or the cheap, sugarcane rum that is so typical for Central America. The alcohol frenzy would lead to drunkenness, loss of most of the money earned on the market, fighting and gambling. Upon returning to the ejidos, still drunk the next afternoon, the men beat their women, who had been home with the children on the milpa.²⁶⁶

There was a lot of drunkenness. A kid, watching his fathers drink, he would get used to it. And from 15 to 18 years, wow, did the people drink. But we had no point of reference for thinking differently... When the organizations²⁶⁷ started here, and we started receiving money, for instance credits or from different co-operations, people drank a lot. The store [the local bodega, a small kiosk in the ejido] was full of booze. And the men got drunk. But if you had 100 pesos, you would drink with your friend, and thus forget sugar and clothes for your kids.²⁶⁸

According to the people involved, this was stopped – or at least stalled²⁶⁹ – by the women in the ejidos. Thus far, we have focused on how the male population was educated in the bible and different crafts by the church. But also the women received education – mostly in baking, sewing and preparing medicine.²⁷⁰ The women decided then, in the women's assembly: Before the next man had time to hit, they would scream. And then they would summon and take the violator to prison. For this purpose, a prison was built in ejido Tabasco.²⁷¹

The first one to suffer this was the comisariado ejidal. He never hit his wife before she screamed, and he was brought to jail. The men, after this, when they go to Las Margaritas, still drink, but they return after having sobered up, and they eat chewing gum. This happened in 1979, more or less.²⁷²

Creating a religious community

When the Catholic Church decided on its new approach towards the indigenous communities in Chiapas, they filled an institutional vacuum that was created when the

²⁶⁶ This may seem a cliché and exaggerated, but there are numerous accounts confirming this version. (Humberto Ruz & Gomez Hernandez 1992, and interviews with informants 7 and 16)

²⁶⁷ This is a reference to what we will see in the next chapter, how the inter-communitary organizations established in Chiapas. In this quote, it refers to how the Tabasqueños could get credits for cultivating the land, and how this money was spent on alcohol.

²⁶⁸ Interview with informant 16

²⁶⁹ Seeing the Tojolabal men drink upon going to Las Margaritas is still an everyday feature.

²⁷⁰ Padre Ramon Castillo, upon asked to describe the most significant change, in his view, in ejido Tabasco in the 1970s and -80s, speaks about the women. They used to say when asked to create something on their own: "That is only for the white man, señor", according to the Padre. "And now, look at them: Proud, independent women." (Interview with informant 7)

²⁷¹ Interviews with informant 7, 16, and 6

²⁷² Interview with informant 15. It deserves to be mentioned in passing that these are not the words of conservative Christians trying to blame all that is bad on alcohol and immoral lifestyle. With the help of La Castalia, the Tabasqueños have a bodega full of contraceptives, for instance. Now, the evangelical (protestant) churches that – as we will see in this chapter – were to set roots in Chiapas in the 1980s, banned alcohol all together, as did EZLN. Not so La Castalia – I have seen with my own eyes how the arrival of the Padre is celebrated with a toast of strong liquor at 7 a.m. (Field observation in ejido Tabasco, June 2007)

mozos left the fincas to become ejiditarios. The Tojolabales had, within the framework of the ejido structure, found a way to organize politically. Yet, as we have seen in this chapter, they were in search for a way of organizing their communities beyond the formal organization of the ejidal system – a way in which they could actually apply for credits – guaranteed in the ejidal framework, as they got to understand when learning the agrarian law – without having to go through outside agents such as lawyers. La palabra de Dios and the reformed Diocese of San Cristobal gave them, at least to some degree, what they were looking for.

We have seen how the Tojolabales lived in separated communities, with social problems such as alcoholism, witchcraft and superstition, and a rather sceptical view on the outside world. They were ready for a change, as the younger generations, later to become catequistas and social leaders, became men in the early 1970s and came in contact, as is the case of ejido Tabasco, with people from their own culture who actually had been outside their communities – the catequistas from Lomantan, and had found that the outside world could offer something. It soon became popular among young men with ambition to attend classes to become catequistas:

There is a Tojolabal mission in Comitán [La Castalia]. There we learned... How to read the bible, first aid, carpenters work, sewing... About the laws... From I was young I wanted to go, to learn something, learn how to study La palabra de Dios. This was in 1975, -76...²⁷³

Also, the church, through the Liberation theology, had something to gain by the contact with the Tojolabales. Not only was it a way to recruit new and loyal supporters of the church: The diocese of San Cristobal wanted to create a kind of “kingdom of God on earth”.²⁷⁴ Thus, the combination of indigenous peoples looking for another social, collective project and a Catholic Church on the search for poor people with whom to work, created a whole new way of social organization: The lands, now in the ownership of the Tojolabales in the form of ejidos, were given a new meaning: It was the Promised Land. Here, a process of liberation would, of course, be the logical next step. “At times, we compare our leaving the fincas to Moses and the escape from Egypt,” as Caralampio Cruz Cruz, one of the catequistas in ejido Tabasco that was educated in this early period, puts it.²⁷⁵ Another important aspect was that of the recuperation of being Tojolabal, which was now filled with a positive meaning. A rather curious result of this, is that being Tojolabal in

²⁷³ Interview with informant 2. Just in the passing: In ejido Tabasco, La Castalia has educated a total of 12 catequistas until today, most of them until 1994 and the Zapatista rebellion.

²⁷⁴ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 225

²⁷⁵ Interview with informant 2. This aspect is stronger, though, in the newly colonized Lacandon jungle, where the former mozos had to populate and cultivate entirely new land.

many cases requires being catholic. In ejido Tabasco, they have a document, signed by all the ejiditarios, prohibiting the very presence of Protestant churches – sextas, as the Tojolabales know them²⁷⁶ – in the ejido. The reasoning behind is rather interesting:

[It is] because of the culture. It is very delicate; we may lose our culture, what makes us what we are. Some Protestants had been here, and we saw that people were bothered. Sects want to destroy our culture... We reached this agreement in the 1970s, when we still were too young to participate... We need to have it [the document stating that ejido Tabasco is to remain catholic.] in writing, so that we will not have conflict over it. Nobody enters, and it is still valid to day. The last time we reauthorized it was some 10 or 12 years ago.²⁷⁷

Of equal importance as the new meaning of identity, the material needs of the communities had to be fulfilled. In order to achieve this, the communities were reformed both spiritually and materially.

Thus, the result is a situation of reflection and learning collectively through dialogue and discussion. The articulating axis of the two would be the revitalization and re-signification of the catholic “faith”, tinted with stains of liberationism.²⁷⁸

Even such seemingly innocent and easy tasks as starting a choir or a band to sing and play inside and outside, at the door, of the church, meant that a whole range of new work had to be done, thus creating belief in the power of the community. Padre Ramon Castillo gives the following account of how little the Tabasqueños believed in their own skills and abilities to do even tasks that seem obvious in everyday life:

The answers we got [when the people of La Castalia tried to teach the Tabasqueñas to do everyday labour.]... “We don’t know how. We cannot do it. Only the white man knows”... But when they learned how to bake bread, for instance... Now they are proud, the women there.²⁷⁹

This process was built on a dialectic axis of what the church wanted to achieve and the needs of the Tojolabales, but the former was to be lifted up and incorporated in the latter from an early stage of this encounter between church and community, from the early 1970s as we have seen in the case of ejido Tabasco. “This was not initiated by us, but by the

²⁷⁶ The word for sect in Spanish is *secta*. For some reason, the Tabasqueños say *sextas*.

²⁷⁷ Interview with informant 16. The rest of the account is also interesting: “Before, we wore white pants, even when I was young, with the red ribbons. It was beautiful, and you could tell a Tojolabal by his clothes. This is very important for the elders. So we cannot let other sects enter. Before, we had a man called Francisco. He was very respectable. He was in touch with nature. If he was to water his milpa, he asked the water to forgive him for changing its natural course. We learned a lot from him. We are close to our culture. We are resisting, we don’t want to lose the harmony. When we started out as catequistas, danger lured.” (Interview with informant 16)

²⁷⁸ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 226

²⁷⁹ Interview with informant 15. Baking bread is not part of indigenous culture in Mexico, nor is it common in urban families. The Mexicans eat *tortillas*, a flat corn bread.

Tojolabales themselves. It was all based on their reflection, or praxis. The first thing we did, was teach to read and write. And the girls learned to sew.²⁸⁰

Creating inter-ejidal relations

Another important change in the worldview of the Tojolabales that took place when the pastoral work combined with the aspirations of the young generation of Tojolabales in the 1970s, was the creation of inter-communal relationships between the different ejidos, thus almost redefining the whole meaning of community in La Cañada de Soledad and ejido Tabasco. This process took place at the same time in the whole state of Chiapas, due to the same process that we are discussing in this chapter. In part, this was due to the creation of an intellectually curious group of catequistas with aspirations beyond their own community, and in part La Castalias position as the natural meeting place for the catequistas in the area.

The Tojolabales do not have a natural centre, unlike many other peoples in Chiapas. But from 1972 or so, they started organizing, by cañadas – valleys. The church initiated this. Before, they lived, isolated, in their own communities, with little contact with the others... But these catequistas wanted to organize, to meet. And they chose to meet here, in La Castalia. Thus, we became the centre of Tojolabal organization. This is where they met.²⁸¹

The Tabasqueños who were educated as catequistas in those early days of the reformed Diocese thus got impulses from the outside and brought new ways of thinking back to the community.

Everything we learned [in La Castalia], we brought back to the community... We were chosen by the community to be catequistas, to represent the community, to represent the needs of the community. We have made a promise to the community, to work for them. And La palabra de Dios says: if you want a better life, you have to get it through living in a better community as a whole.²⁸²

But of even greater importance in making a new identity across ejido borders than these sporadic inter-communitary encounters in La Castalia was the organization of the Indigenous congress in 1974, as we will see in the following.

Congreso Indígena in San Cristobal de Las Casas in 1974

This event, held in San Cristobal, the old colonial capital of Chiapas between October 12 and 15 in 1974, is one of the important hallmarks in the organization of social movements in Chiapas, only surpassed by Zapatismo. It marks, in the words of Antonio García de León, the end of a total standstill in the agrarian, indigenous sectors of Chiapas, a standstill

²⁸⁰ Interview with informant 7

²⁸¹ Interview with informant 7

²⁸² Interview with informant 16

that started in 1939 with the end of the Cardenista reforms.²⁸³ The congress was organized by the diocese of San Cristobal, with at least initial help from the state government.²⁸⁴ It united people from the four biggest indigenous groups in Chiapas. 1230 delegates from 327 communities were present; 587 Tzeltales, 330 Tzotziles, 152 Tojolabales, and 161 Choles. Four subjects were debated in great detail; lands, commerce, education, and health. “The fifth subject, that of politics, was not allowed by the original organizer,²⁸⁵ but without a doubt, it was the subject that bathed every colour during the congress.”²⁸⁶

El Congreso indigena allowed peoples from all over the state of Chiapas to meet and discuss their problems, needs and desires. Before the congress, the organizers²⁸⁷ had gathered information on what the people wanted to discuss in sub-congresses and meetings in ejidos and municipalities. During the congress, the diocese of Samuel Ruiz showed their impressive apparatus: Seeing as the four different ethnic groups do not understand each other, there were simultaneous translations in four languages (including Spanish) at all times, and the congress published a newspaper, also in every language spoken by the representatives present at the congress. Without the apparatus of the church, a project of this size could never have been taken on.²⁸⁸

The congress was in many ways a continuation of the pastoral work in the communities, but in a much bigger scale. The contenders reflected in the same way they had done in their work as catequistas. The result was a radicalization of the indigenous struggle in Chiapas, as this speech from a Tzeltal leader indicates:

Fray Bartolomé²⁸⁹ is not alive today... Who is going to defend us from injustice and give us our freedom? I do not think the hispanic is going to defend us, the government might or it might not, so: Who is going to defend us? I think that our only defence is organization, that we all organize so that we can be free and work better. We all have to be the new Bartolomé: We will make it once we are capable of defending the organization, because unity makes strong.²⁹⁰

The Congreso Indigena was to be a starting point of a new era, so to speak, in Chiapas. The discussions and reflections that were floating in the air, in many languages, in San

²⁸³ Garcia de Leon 2002. The author is here talking about outside, dramatic developments. As we have seen, the wheels of history were in motion even in the period discussed in this chapter and the last.

²⁸⁴ The latter withdrew its support and presence when the delegates from San Juan Chamula, an emblematic indigenous community close to San Cristobal, denounced electoral fraud by the ruling party – the ever-present PRI – in the municipio. (See García de Leon 2002, p 169)

²⁸⁵ The state government, see above

²⁸⁶ García de Leon 2002 p 168

²⁸⁷ The church and the catequistas this time, not the government

²⁸⁸ See Garcia de Leon 2002, but also interviews with informant 7, and Tello Diaz 2005

²⁸⁹ Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1484-1566) was a Spanish priest and later bishop of Chiapas. Upon seeing the consequences of the conquest for the indigenous population he turned into a stern defender of indigenous rights. He argued, in the face of the papal church, that the indigenous peoples did have a soul, and thus managed to prohibit direct enslaving of the indigenous peoples. He is known as the “Apostle of the Indigenous”. (Escalante Gonzalbo et.al 2005)

²⁹⁰ In García de Leon 2002, p 171

Cristobal in October 1974 were to live on, albeit not necessarily in the same form. In the words of Eduardo Lopez Mendez, the delegate from ejido Tabasco in the congress:

In 1975 [Mendez Lopez misspeaks, the right year is 1974] they announced the congress in San Cristobal. They gathered all the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. I was lucky enough to participate... After the congress, we organized an indigenous council, to keep the ideas, what we had agreed on, alive.²⁹¹

This *Consejo Indigena* – the indigenous council – Mendez Lopez speaks of was set up in each region, organized by the church and young, urban activists that were coming to Chiapas in big numbers in the mid-1970s (more on them in the next chapter), in the aftermath of the congress in San Cristobal in 1974. In that way, the discussion and the ever stronger inter-communitary bonds were kept alive.

An indigenous identity is created

The praxis of the catequistas was changed according to the wishes and needs of the communities. Thus, after the Congreso Indigena in 1974, being catequista meant more than working within the ejido of origin. Through the extensive web of catequistas, originally intended as a means to spreading the word of God, representatives from different ejidos saw that they had a tool with which to communicate with other ejidos and peoples. Based on the experience in San Cristobal in 1974, knowing that their common struggle united more than the division between ejidos (an example of which is, as we have seen, when ejido Tabasco was fighting neighbouring Tojolabal ejido Morelia over the extension of the territory), the catequistas started using this infrastructure as a means to put more pressure on the government.²⁹²

Based on this, the peoples of Chiapas, ejido Tabasco included, started seeing themselves as dignified people, worthy the love of God without having to give up their own culture more than what had already been done during 500 years of Spanish supremacy. Thus, the catequista became the

²⁹¹ Interview with informant 13

²⁹² There is, however, one important exception to this newly found common identity: The evangelical ejidos and people. As we have already seen, the different Protestant "sects" were not welcome in Tabasco. The division between those who followed (and follow, still today) the diocese of San Cristobal and the Protestants is a big one. This proves, off course, that the emancipation that we have seen in this chapter was in large parts due to, and dependent on, the Catholic Church, and that this church saw it chance to become even more powerful in the region. This becomes even clearer if one considers that the reform of Samuel Ruiz church took place only after the arrival of the evangelical movements in the region of Las Margaritas, for instance. It is also true, however, that Catholicism had been a part of indigenous tradition for hundreds of years, and was incorporated as such. (Estrada Saavedra 2006)

spokesman for the communal reflection, not the teacher bringing the pre-fabricated answer. The word of God reflects in the womb of the community, starting with the events and group dynamics, and the catequistas are the collectors of the harvest of communal thought.²⁹³

But the emancipation process of La palabra de Dios had its limits. The priests, such as Padre Ramon Castillo, had helped give the Tojolabales the means to create their own path, helping them to define this path. Ejido Tabasco came in touch with La Castalia more than 30 years after receiving their ejido rights. They were still in search for an identity in their “new” role as free men and women working the land years after leaving the finca. In accordance with Liberation theology, together the indigenous peoples and the church had overcome the “artificial divide” between religion, social reality and politics through a circle of evangelization – conscious raising – organization.²⁹⁴ The last word is a key word here. The church, contrary to all its good intentions, had neither the man power nor the knowledge to take that last step in the scheme it had created. Together with the Tojolabales in ejido Tabasco and elsewhere, they had pinpointed the problem. An inter-ejido organization was created. A clear perception of the government – both regional and national – as an obstacle to overcome in the struggle to better indigenous life in Chiapas was developed. Both church and the ejiditarios themselves realized that better organization and more power behind the newly formulated demands were needed.

To better be able to organize in tighter, more stable structures, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas looked to the newly arrived political activists that had helped the Diocese of San Cristobal with the organization of the congress in San Cristobal. They would be happy to help out, as we will see in the next chapter.

A few closing remarks before we move on to the next chapter: The success of the diocese project in Chiapas has many explanations. I would like to mention two of them here. The first one we have already discussed; the indigenous peoples were constantly looking for ways to improve their conditions, socially and culturally. Another important reason, tightly connected to the first one, was that the indigenous ejiditarios were now, for the first time, part of the Mexican national project. The patron was no longer the – only, at least – authority. Through the Cardenista reform the national government had entered the indigenous communities as an important power factor, and one with which to negotiate. Thus, the different indigenous peasants were now looking for a way to improve their position not only in the power struggle with local elites, but, as a group, in the very national project.

²⁹³ Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 191

²⁹⁴ Op.cit., p 263

In other words; not only did the internal and local structures change with the emergence of the Catholic Church in Chiapas, but also the way of thinking about the dynamics of the nation as a whole. This, of course, would not have been possible without the Cardenista reform; the “freeing” of the *mozos* and the incorporation of the *ejido* structure in the corporative apparatus of post-revolution Mexico.²⁹⁵

To finish off with the words of Antonio García de León:

The Congreso Indígena unleashed the hidden forces of the Chiapan reality. It was like the trunk of a tree with 500 year old roots and which branches and leafs started to bloom immediately afterwards in a huge variety of peasant organizations that grew and consolidated with the same social basis.²⁹⁶

In the next chapter we will deal with the inter-*ejidal* organization and the many actors pushing and pulling in different directions. One of these actors will still be the Catholic Church, of course. With the words of Knut Kjeldstadli from the theory chapter: “All social movements can be understood as being sedimentary layers, where old movements and older forms of organization live alongside with older ones.”²⁹⁷

²⁹⁵ Legorreta 1998, p 29

²⁹⁶ García de León 2002, p 169

²⁹⁷ Kjeldstadli 2002

Chapter 6: Social projects in Chiapas

We have seen how the diocese of San Cristobal played an important role in the emancipation process that was initiated when the Tojolabales left the finca to become ejiditarios, through re-structuring the social bonds and conscious raising in the indigenous communities such as ejido Tabasco. But not all the work the church did was successful, off course. We will start this chapter by looking at some of the major limitations to the liberation project taken on by the Catholic Church in Chiapas, and, more general, of the internal workings of the indigenous communities themselves.

The catequista as a cacique

One major problem was created in the very focal centre of the structure created by the pastoral work: The institution of the catequistas. We have seen the positive effects of this, now it is time to turn the coin and show the other face.

Once somebody was handpicked to be catequista, in the early stages, as we have seen, by the church, with time by the communities themselves, the groundwork was laid for the creation of a new category of people: The intermediaries between the outside world and the ejidos. Obtaining the honour of such a role gave, as is to be expected, some personal advantages when seeking alliances and personal prestige. And despite the fact that the catequistas did good work for their community, there is little doubt that the upper-hand that was granted the catequistas in areas such as knowledge, contacts and access to resources, thus gave “natural access” to creating a new elite within the community, with themselves as leaders, albeit informally.²⁹⁸

This is called *cacicazgo* in Mexico – the strong man using all the room permitted by the system to get personal (or communal) advantages. The danger of the *cacicazgo* is inherit in the forming of catequistas, and thus a problem with the new structure created by the church.

²⁹⁸ An observation here: My first contact in ejido Tabasco arranged for a collective interview with Medellin del Carmen. When introducing me and my project, he gave a fifteen minute speech, telling his fellow ejiditarios what to tell me (I do not speak Tojolabal, but all the key words were in Spanish). He also served as interpreter, thus censoring all the answers. He would never let me talk to other people without him being present, and if he was not there during my visits, he had a member of his close family follow me around. This went on for two weeks. When I later found another way of entering, and, as time went on gained the confidence of other people in the ejido, they told me they initially had no idea what I was doing in Tabasco and that they thought I was there to help this cacique with a personal project (which, in a way, was close to the truth; The cacique was trying to get me to finance the building of a new Church in his part of the community). Of course, much of the badmouthing that was shared with me is part of a power struggle between different strong social leaders. But that only serves to prove the point of this footnote. (Field observation in ejido Tabasco, May 2007)

Of course, the most important cacique of them all in the structures created by the diocese would be the Catholic Church itself. Having re-structured the very essence of communal life based on biblical principals – even if liberationist and in cooperation with the communities themselves – and having made itself the intermediate between the indigenous world and that on the outside, the diocese of San Cristobal was the most important institution of political control in these communities.

Limitations in the diocese project

Another problem, which we have barely touched this far, is the way of looking at the communities and the indigenous peoples. In trying to soften its paternalistic views of its subjects, the church took on some rather extreme views in the opposite direction.²⁹⁹ The indigenous communities are pure, not touched by the hand of evil and corruption – also known as western civilization – to much of the staff of the church institutions working in indigenous regions in Chiapas.³⁰⁰

Not only is this outlook wrong in many aspects. Where, for instance, does Christianity fit in with the pre-columbian cultures? And was the Brujeria discussed in chapter six not a touch extreme coming from the innocent, pure indigenous of this worldview? More serious is the fact that this view impedes sober analysis of the situation and can even lead to paternalism (like the good father, the church forgives his pure and noble son everything).

To sum up, one can say that the pastoral work of the Catholic Church had three clear and somewhat different outcomes, of which two can be viewed as agents of change and the third as somewhat more questionable:

1. The redefinition of social structures in the indigenous communities, through education and “reflection”, and through helping these communities define themselves, based on a new belief in themselves and their culture.
2. Participation in the national project, looking for ways of improving the situation in confrontation with the local as well as national elites. This project, as we will see in this chapter, was to be continued by other political and social projects in the aftermath of the Congreso Indigena in 1974.

²⁹⁹ A limited success, seeing as the church remained on top of the chain through its credibility as the messenger of God, its control over the catequista institution and the education, and as the link connecting the ejidos to the outside.

³⁰⁰ This is the approach of Carlos Lenkersdorf, for instance (see Lenkersdorf, 1999). For more on this, though radical in its arguments, see Pickard 2003. For a more sober discussion, see Viquiera 1999.

3. A dangerous, inherited consequence of the emancipation project taken on by the diocese and the communities is that of empowering the “Indian myth”, blaming all the sorrows and troubles of these peoples on the arrival of the Spanish. The conclusion at hand tended to be one of “the things we do wrong are not our fault, because these customs were not part of our culture, all the bad stuff was brought here by the Spanish.”³⁰¹

All of the three above mentioned points were to show up again in the new political projects in Chiapas, including the Zapatista project, as we will see later on. The latter point and its consequences we have even touched in the discussion of the existing literature about Zapatismo (chapter 1).

Limitations in the Tojolabal project

We have seen how the Tojolabales were dependent on the federal government to get their lands, and how the Catholic Church was needed or at least welcomed as a means to internal transformation in the communities. In this chapter (and the next) we will see how even more external actors influenced the reality of indigenous Chiapas. This openness – or, in a more negative approach: vulnerability, meaning the lack of defence – towards new ideas shows us that the Tojolabales and other peoples were looking for ways of improving their socio-economic situation as well as the socio-cultural and identical. This sort of openness towards new ideas and outside help did, as we have seen in the last chapter, pay off – with Liberation theology came literacy, for example. But what this constant seeking also tells us is the extreme dependency on outside factors, and maybe even the weakness of the indigenous peoples of Chiapas when it comes to defending against outside manipulation. This vulnerability may be easy to understand, as we now know the historical and structural situation in indigenous Chiapas over the last 500 years, but it is still proof of some weaknesses in the Chiapan indigenous emancipation project. This dependency on outside factors will be discussed in greater detail in the concluding phases of this paper. Now we will look at some of the outsiders that tried to gain ground in Chiapas in the aftermath of the Congreso indigena, and how they found willing partners in ejido Tabasco and other communities, still on the lookout for ways of improving their situation.

³⁰¹ Legorreta 1998, p 47

The national context

Before we move on, it is necessary to have a short look at the national context in the late 1960s and -70s. This was a period of rupture and social unrest in Mexico, as in the rest of the western world. Student demonstrations were the sign of the time, and a radicalization of opposition forces. PRI was still in power, and Mexico was ruled by a corporative elite structure – the very same one established by Lazaro Cardenas.³⁰²

In 1968, shortly before the Olympic Games were to be held in Mexico City, a student demonstration was met with violence from the police and army. In what is later known as the massacre in Tlatelolco, the police and the army in combination shot into the masses of people gathered in one of the historical centres of Mexico City. Numbers differ, but at least a few hundred demonstrators were killed. This bloodbath was to initiate the Dirty war in Mexico, in which the government repressed leftist organizations – and guerrillas –with every mean available. There are countless stories of torture and murder during the about ten years that the Dirty war lasted.³⁰³

The anti-systemical forces were forced to go underground. The hope of a socialist revolution was strong all over Latin America, in part because of the successful takeover in Cuba in 1959 and in part due to world conjunctures. The state repression radicalized these leftist groups, many of which ended up as guerrilla movements. One of these guerrillas was brutally crushed in Chiapas in 1974, the FLN, at the time of the Congreso indigena in San Cristobal. We will get to know that group in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to say that many of the clandestine groups saw in Chiapas the possibility to work for the revolution in a state ridden with poverty, weak governmental presence and “active subjects” that would enable the Revolution.³⁰⁴

Short overview of different political projects in Chiapas

We have seen how the Congreso Indigena in 1974 gave impulses that would lead to the creation of common identity in indigenous Chiapas. The Congress was also the introduction of other political players than the diocese of San Cristobal in Chiapas: Bishop Samuel Ruiz invited some leftist activist groups to help organize the congress.

Even though the catequistas held the diocese of San Cristobal in high regard, knowing that they owed their status and parts of the development of their communities to the

³⁰² Escalante Gonzalbo, et.al 2005

³⁰³ Montemayor 2004

³⁰⁴ Carmen Legorreta offers a first hand account of how state repression forced radical students underground, and of how many came to Chiapas to work for the Revolution. (Legorreta 1998)

institution, they saw the limitations of this project of emancipation.³⁰⁵ The seed of inter-community relations and the faith in the Tojolabales as a group worthy of the love of God was sown, but now what? Could biblical references, a new-found pride and good relations with the neighbouring communities overcome poverty, deceases, social injustice, lack of communications and infrastructure and the different forms of racism that made the indigenous peoples of Mexico suffer?

This is where different political projects enter the story. Three main alternatives became manifest towards the end of the 1970s; oppositional (and marginal) political parties (on the left), the official party (PRI) and leftist activists working underground. I will focus on the latter as they constitute what eventually were to become the bases of EZLN or competing over the same communities as the Zapatistas.

Union del Pueblo and Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel

The arrival of a group of *norteños* – urban political activists, denominated *northerners* by the indigenous population – to Chiapas, meant yet another reconfiguration of the social structure in Chiapas and Las Margaritas. These groups, whose influence was growing from the mid 1970s, consisted mainly of students and political activist from outside the state of Chiapas. They started to organize the indigenous communities according to the Maoist ideas of the *inverted pyramid of power*, trying to create the republic of the masses in the rural environment. Their work was, at least initially, clandestine – seeing as they did not rule out the need for armed rebellion.³⁰⁶

The catequistas, formed and educated by the diocese, were once again the driving forces within the communities in this process. This did not, however, mean that they abandoned their work as the church representatives – working politically and religiously at the same time was *walking down complimentary roads*³⁰⁷, much in accordance with Liberation theology. Only this time, the political project was driven by other forces than the Catholic Church.

The *norteños* came to Chiapas because of state repression and what they perceived as the fertile Chiapan soil for creating a revolutionary vanguard. They worked as ideologists (trying to create a popular, republican power based on Maoist ideas), creators and promoters of social and productive projects (trying to stimulate the creation of clinics,

³⁰⁵ Estrada Saavedra 2007

³⁰⁶ Op.cit.

³⁰⁷ Legorreta 1998

schools etc, as well as trying to commercialize coffee in order to get better prices on the market etc) and as advisers in different topics. They were known as *asesores* – advisers – and had, in most cases, good contacts with universities, NGOs and government officials, thus facilitating the fulfilment of the different projects that were taken on by the indigenous communities.³⁰⁸

The first group to really have an impact in larger scale was *Union del Pueblo*, a Marxist organization inspired by the Leninist theory of organization and the Maoist popular war, as well as on the Mexican revolutionary heroes Pancho Villa and Emiliano Zapata. This group participated in the Congreso Indígena, helping with the organization of the event.³⁰⁹

The Congreso indígena gave Union del Pueblo the possibility to establish contacts with the indigenous communities in Chiapas. Seeing as the Maoist-Leninist organization was planning on making a revolution through constructing a vanguard of the peasant and working people, this opportunity was seized with both hands. Also, being able to operate in Chiapas, thus in the periphery, was a blessing rather than an obstacle, due to the idea that the revolution is brought to the centre from the periphery, to city from countryside.³¹⁰ When coming to Chiapas in the mid-1970s, Union del Pueblo was not opposed to taking up arms, but all in due time. The first task at hand was to prepare the people through education and organization.

After the congress in 1974, Union del Pueblo established themselves in an ejido called Emiliano Zapata in the Lacandon jungle.³¹¹ (See map 2.2) Union del Pueblo started giving classes in Spanish and agrarian law and in the history of the Mexican Revolution as well as the historical materialism and theories on political organization. As such, they were in many ways just continuing the work of the diocese, but with a more radical political message and offering, in theory at least, the means to reaching the goals set forth by the diocese work.

Following the textbook, Union del Pueblo was looking for pretexts to create a new form of organization along Maoist lines. They found this in the in-communication of the ejidal communities in Chiapas. On December 12, 1975, Union del Pueblo and indigenous leaders (catequistas all of them) in the region of Emiliano Zapata reached an important goal: The

³⁰⁸ See Tello Diaz 2005

³⁰⁹ Estrada Saavedra 2006

³¹⁰ Legorreta 1998

³¹¹ The manpower needed for this was not at all overwhelming: One man, a Jaime Soto, was the sole representative of Union del Pueblo living in indigenous communities during the first two years of organization in Chiapas. (Tello Diaz 2005)

first ejido union was created.³¹² Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel, as the union was named,³¹³ consisted of 18 ejidos. Within a few months the number of member communities more than doubled. Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel was created under the motto of BAC, the Spanish initials meaning Storage, an Aeroplane and a Bus, which was what the union aimed to obtain.³¹⁴

Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel was constructed according to the idea of democratic centralism, or the inverted pyramid. This organizational form was to inspire and thus dominate the new inter-ejidal organizations that were formed in Chiapas in the 1970s and -80s, including what was to become EZLN. For an illustration of the structure, see figure 6.1.

To make a decision in the ejido union, the topic was first discussed in the ejidal assembly of each ejido, then in the regional assembly (if this institution existed, depending on the size of the union) before the conclusions and agreements were taken to the general assembly, the highest authority regarding inter-ejido topics. The general assembly would also name the representatives of the administrative council.³¹⁵

Shortly after the construction of Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel, *Lucha Campesina* – Rural workers struggle – was formed among Tojolabal communities in Las Margaritas August 4, 1978, though not including Tabasco.³¹⁶ We will look at *Lucha Campesina* later on, as we deal with inter-ejidal organization in Tabasco.

Due to space limits, we cannot go into all the unions created in indigenous Chiapas, nor all the political groups contending over influence in the region. It suffices to say that most ejido unions were created along the lines of Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel. Before we have a look at another, more complicated form of organisation – a union of ejido unions – that was created in the 1980s, I would like to describe an incident of massive importance in the radicalization of the political scene in Chiapas:

July 8, 1977: A conflict over land in ejido Nueva Providencia (see map 2.2) in the municipality of Las Margaritas ends with the brutal killing of six policemen and a local,

³¹² The short time passing between the indigenous congress in 1974 and the creation of Quiptic can be explained by the fact Union del Pueblo was present in the Lacandon from the early 1970s, but gained strength only when given responsibility by the bishop. (Legorreta 1998)

³¹³ The name is Tzeltal, and means something like "Our force to progress"

³¹⁴ "Una Bodega, un Avion y un Camion". (Legorreta 1998, p 72)

³¹⁵ In Estrada Saavedra, 2007. Union del Pueblo, more alert to the dangers of the caciques than the Catholic Church, looked for ways to avoid power abuse among the delegates to this general assembly. The agreements of the assembly ejidal had to be presented in writing, and the positions were rotative in order to avoid concentration of power in few hands. The norteños were present in these assemblies, always with an independent interpreter so that they could follow the discussion. This was not necessarily done to control the meetings, but to make sure that the development of the project of creating popular power went according to plan (Legorreta 1998). If this made the norteños the cacique is of course an aspect that could be debated.

³¹⁶ According to Legorreta, ejido Tabasco was among the founding ejidos of *Lucha Campesina*. This is wrong, as I will show further on in this chapter. (Legorreta 1998)

indigenous cacique. The conflict started when the cacique and his family refused to admit a resolution giving other ejiditarios the right to use some land that they considered theirs. When the police arrived, it was to help the cacique keep his land. They arrested and harmed, together with the caciques men, a young farmer. The ejiditarios asked Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel, which was holding an assembly close by, for help. The assembly decided to help free the young farmer. Upon arriving, the many hundred indigenous people were met by the police shooting at them. The riots that broke out cost the life of the above mentioned seven people.³¹⁷

The governor eventually calmed down the following anger by inviting the members of the union to a meeting, explaining the situation and promising it would not happen again. But now government violence had been introduced in a very open manner in Chiapas, and the events in ejido Nueva Providencia was to have an impact on the way of thinking about organizing among the indigenous. Would it be a good idea to be able to defend against the violence of the government as well as that of the local finqueros and big landowners – *La familia Chiapaneca*? Another important consequence was that the local governors came to fear the power of the unions, which led to greater repression in the following decade.

The position of the government after this conflict can be summed up in the following quote by Rene Gomez, at the time an activist in Union del Pueblo and a political advisor to the Quiptic:

Even though we tried to establish a dialogue with the state governments, it was impossible. For them there only existed two kinds of organization, we were black or white: Either you were with them or you were against them. Despite all our efforts to tell them that we were not one or the other, that we wanted a new relationship, they did not accept it.³¹⁸

La Aric – Union of Unions

In 1979, Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel and Maoist group Linea Proletaria took on an ambitious project that has to be mentioned here, however brief. Linea Proletaria (also known as Politica Popular) came to Chiapas in 1976, and joined forces with Union del Pueblo. They were important in the spreading of the organizational structure of Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel (the inverted pyramid) to other ejido unions in Chiapas, but after only one year in the state they got into a conflict with the diocese of San Cristobal and were expelled from Chiapas.³¹⁹

³¹⁷ Legorreta 1998, p 90, and interviews with informants 7 and 8

³¹⁸ Rene Gomez, quoted in Legorreta 1998, p 94

³¹⁹ It seems we have lost sight of the indigenous peoples in this account on the political organization, that they are mere means in the organizational struggles of outsiders. That is, of course, not the case. The new organizations were formed by and around the needs and desires of the communities, as we will see when we

But in 1979 they returned, and with them a super-union of ejidos was introduced in Chiapas one year later: *Union de Uniones Ejidales y Grupos Campesinos Solidarios de Chiapas* – Union of Ejidal Unions and Solidary Peasant Groups of Chiapas. This organization was created by the members of Linea Proletaria as a means of deepening the organizational structures of what, as we have seen, the leftists saw as a “Republic of the masses”. The pretext this time was the commercialization of coffee. This Union of unions was created as an addition to the governmental INMECAFE³²⁰, but nevertheless the governor of Chiapas of the time, Juan Sabines, refused to help the new organization with credits and direct help in the production of coffee as well as in other problems of social and economic nature.

Before we move on, I would like to underline one point: Linea Proletaria was, as we have seen, expelled by the Catholic Church because of complaints from the communities in 1978, thus showing the power of the latter. But Linea Proletaria came back, invited by the very same church and the communities that expelled them in the first place. If the church had not realized its own limitations within the context of the project taken on by the diocese before, this was the time to contemplate its resources. This is how the union Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel analysed the situation:

Towards the end of 1979, it was obvious that the pastoral work had developed into a more direct political project... Through its relationship with God and the community they reached a clearer analysis of their situation, of their humanizing capacity and their historical being, directed towards the future, towards transformation... After broad reflection, they saw that the Church could not fulfil the needs of an organization: It is not its role to lead a political movement.³²¹

The communities themselves (and the Church) realized that they had to accept the help from outsiders – the Maoists preaching Revolution and armed rebellion – in order to keep the emancipating and political projects in Chiapas moving along the lines that were drawn up by the Church.

The Union of unions was created on the basis of the commercialization of coffee, but it was to become much more than just an organization aiming to improve the payment for

look at ejido Tabasco later on. But in many ways the reorganization was an outside project. Indigenous leaders were looking for ways to manoeuvre between the influence of the diocese and the leftist activists. According to Estrada Saavedra, the expulsion of Linea Proletaria from Chiapas was caused by indigenous leaders responding to criticism from the leftists by telling the church that the activists did not respect La palabra de Dios. What this shows is that expect for the (obvious) indigenous involvement in the processes discussed here, the difference between the diocese and the political activists were big, and the mutual mistrust ever present. The church feared that their efforts would vanish or be swallowed by organizations looking to take advantage of the political organization and the conscious raising created by the men of God, while the norteño activists feared the spiritual stronghold of the church and its lack of political radicalism. (Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 335)

³²⁰ Instituto Mexicano del Café

³²¹ Document from Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel, in Legorreta 1998, p 130

agricultural products. It first participated in land conflict when state governor Sabines (1977-82) informed the new settlers in great parts of the Lacandon jungle that they had to leave their newfound lands because of a presidential decision granting land rights to the “real” Lacandonians.³²² This intent to divide the indigenous population on the part of the government was to a certain extent successful, but combined with lack of public funding, the violence of the public servants and local leaders (as in the case of Nueva Providencia) and the ever-existing racism, this move would only lead to the radicalization of the indigenous population of Chiapas.

The Union of unions, later to become La Aric Union de Uniones (in 1988) due to internal divisions, was to play an important role in Chiapas throughout the 1980s, and its history is an interesting one. Seeing as we have to move on, suffices to say that the Maoist idea of creating the Republic of the masses had its successes, that the political organization got stronger by the efforts of the “norteño advisors”. But it is also worth noting that internal division was an everyday happening, due to both differences within the group of advisors and intra- and inter-communal differences.³²³ Those who oppose the Linea Popular politics tend to claim that they got too preoccupied with seeking credits and commercializing agricultural products, thus losing sight of the structural problems of the region. With time, they dropped the idea of the armed rebellion, focusing on more easily achievable goals. It is, perhaps, telling, all though not 100 percent fair to see that many of these advisors today work as public servants, thus with the very same government that they opposed some 20 years ago. One can say that, according to the theory of mass mobilization of these groups, the favourable moment for the structural political change never appeared. With that being

³²² We have not at all focused on the Colonization of the Lacandon jungle in this thesis, simply because it did not affect, directly at least, ejido Tabasco. But this region deserves to be mentioned, seeing as it was to become the Zapatista stronghold and more “emblematic” for the historic events discussed in this thesis than the communities of relative proximity to the town of Las Margaritas, such as ejido Tabasco. When leaving the fincas, not all Tojolabales and other ethnicities got ejido rights on the different fincas. Many went to colonize the Lacandon jungle, until the middle of the 20th century almost un-populated. These people had to create a whole new meaning of life as they came to the jungle, and to recreate and create social structures and organisation. In 1972, president Luis Echeverría granted ownership of 61 431 hectares of land to 66 families of Lacandonians, the only ethnic group that lived in the jungle before the exodus from the fincas. Each family thus got 9307 hectares, at the cost of more than 4000 “newcomers” who had populated and cultivated the region. 36 communities were threatened by eviction, notwithstanding the fact that they had lived there for years and, in some cases, even had formal ejidal rights. The areas most affected by this presidential decree were later to become the absolute stronghold of the Zapatista movement. The public financial bank Nafinsa, through an enterprise called Cofolasa, later signed a contract for 35 000 cubic meters of wood each year with the Lacandonians at a not fixed rate. (Tello Diaz 2005, p 65)

³²³ The organization of such unions of unions (Union de uniones / La Aric and CIOAC (the latter we will focus on later in this chapter) being the examples in Chiapas) was similar to the ejido unions (see figure 6.1, appendix 4), only adding yet another level of administration, the *consejo de administracion*, consisting of a president, a secretary and a tesorero. This consejo deals with the everyday work of the organization, sending information down the hierarchy and receiving topics to discuss from below.

said, we will meet with La Aric again as we reach the Zapatista rebellion in the next chapter.

Ejido Tabasco walks for one year with Lucha Campesina

In this subchapter we will look at how the Tojolabales of ejido Tabasco started a process of re-organization, based on many of the ideas and structures we have discussed above. This process in Tabasco is in many ways a universal one, applicable to the whole of Chiapas, off course with some local and historical differences.

In the creation of ejido unions in and around ejido Tabasco, once again, the diocese representative in Comitán, La Castalia, is an important actor in the inner life of the community, as this quote from Caralampio Cruz Cruz shows:

In 1978 or 79... We learned in La Castalia how to form ejido unions. In those days, there were more finqueros here. In La Castalia the idea of forming an ejido union was born, or how to work together in order to reach a point where we all would be equal.³²⁴

This account is, as far as I can see, an accurate one, and it seems plausible that the people of La Castalia brought this kind of inter-communal organization to ejido Tabasco. But Padre Ramon Castillo acknowledges the work of the norteros – the leftist activists and advisors – in his account:

The social organization started here... well, due to us, but in the strictly political sense. It started after the congress in 1974. With Política Popular...³²⁵ They were here, even, in la Soledad, helping out. First came Lucha Campesina.³²⁶

Lucha Campesina, the first ejido union in the vicinity of ejido Tabasco, was created in August 1978 – as we have seen, without the participation of the Tabasqueños. This first Tojolabal ejidal union was created much in the same way as the Quiptic Ta Lecubtesel, and consisted of some 20 communities in Las Margaritas.³²⁷ Lucha Campesina was to be the

³²⁴ Interview with informant 2

³²⁵ Often used as a synonym to Línea Proletaria

³²⁶ Interview with informant 7

³²⁷ A few notes on the sources here: Eduardo López Méndez told me in interview about the number of original members of Lucha Campesina: "In 1978, Lucha Campesina was organized... Some 20 or 30 communities [joined from the beginning]." (Interview with informant 3.2). Carmen Legorreta names 15 original members (Legorreta 1998, p 92), but this has to be inaccurate seeing as she mentions ejido Tabasco as one of the founding members of Lucha Campesina, when in reality the Tabasqueños only "walked one year with Lucha Campesina", starting from the troubles in 1979 (see next next page) (interview with informant 2). There are no archives with information about this creation. The same is true for Tierra y Libertad and la CIOAC, both of which we will have a look at later on in this chapter. For Tierra y Libertad, internal division and burnt down buildings have caused the archives to disappear or at least be temporarily lost. La CIOAC had no idea where their archives could be found, due to division and power struggles. Here I therefore depend on interviews and the scarce existing literature.

model of the Union that was created with the participation of ejido Tabasco; Tierra y libertad.

It was not only the classes in La Castalia mentioned above that got the people of ejido Tabasco starting thinking about creating an ejido union. Because of an unfortunate incident, they were forced to ask newly founded Lucha Campesina for help. In 1978, the Tabasqueños cut down some trees on the land of the owner of Medellin without permission, according to themselves due to a misunderstanding.³²⁸ This was considered a serious crime, so the police came at the request of the landlord and arrested two Tabasqueños, one of them the Comisariado ejidal.

In 1978, Lucha Campesina was formed in another Cañada, close to Altamirano... We came in contact with them because we had two compañeros incarcerated because we cut down some trees to get wood ... We were fighting to free them. And then we heard of Lucha Campesina. We went to see the president [of Lucha Campesina] We asked for help, and he said: no problem, this I why we created the union... We managed to get the two out of prison.³²⁹

This successful process led the Tabasqueños to consider joining Lucha Campesina, but because of the distance between Tabasco and Lomantan (a good days walk), where Lucha Campesina had its “headquarters”, the Tabasqueños decided after one year with Lucha Campesina to create an ejido union of their own.³³⁰

Creating Tierra y Libertad

According to the Tabasqueños, the Tojolabales never received help nor advice from outsiders when creating the ejido unions in the region: “Lucha Campesina never had a hispanic leader, it was all Tojolabal. We saw that unity gave strength, in facing the government. So we created La Union de ejidos Tierra y libertad. It was constituted in 1979.”³³¹ That no outsiders participated in the creation of Lucha Campesina nor in creating Tierra y Libertad, would have been exceptional in Chiapas in the late 1970s – as we have seen, outside agents were helping out in this process throughout the state. Nor does it seem true that the ejido unions in the area were creation of the Tojolabales themselves without any alien involvement: The Maoist activist working in indigenous Chiapas in the 1970s were looking for the one uniting factor that would facilitate organization, as we have seen. These factors are known as *pretexts* – a (real) motive and motivation shown to the outside

³²⁸ Interview with informant 13. See also interview with informant 3.2.

³²⁹ Interview with informant 2. Eduardo Mendez Lopez says: “They promised to fight to the last man in order to free the two... We got them out, without paying un peso.” (Interview with informant 13)

³³⁰ “Putá, it took almost two days to get to were the meetings were held.” (Interview with informant 13)

³³¹ Interview with informant 2

world, meant to attract followers – in Maoist thought. Tierra y libertad was created based on a pretext of transportation. Padre Ramon Castillo says: “Here the struggle was not that strong, because there was no one to fight... So they found a pretext: transport.”³³²

And even though it is true that Lucha Campesina never had a Hispanic leader, as Caralampio Cruz Cruz says, there is little doubt that this organization was formed in cooperation with outside agents – the so-called *norteños*.³³³ Be that as it may, Tierra y libertad was created in 1979. Written sources are scarce on this subject so we have to relay on the oral ones. Eduardo Lopez Mendez says about the process:

La palabra de Dios says: The ones who work the milpa must organize. If you do not, you will never get the *compañeros* out of prison. This is what Carlos³³⁴ told us. And I took the word, and said: Yes, that is what we have to do. We had thought along the same lines... We said: Why don't we use what we have learned from Lucha Campesina, and gather all the *catequistas* in this area [cañada de Soledad] to create an organization of our own? We did this to be stronger. To get our petitions for more land through. It was very hard, because everywhere PRI had the power, every community was PRI community. But we entered the different communities through La palabra de Dios. In the beginning, six communities joined, in total some 2000 people. I was named the first authority. But we had to fight, to push.³³⁵

It is obvious from the account above that the diocese of San Cristobal – in this case German anthropologist and La Castalia staff member Carlos Lenkersdorf – was still a major influence, that La palabra de Dios and the *catequistas* was a driving force even behind the deepening of political organization.

In creating Tierra y libertad, the *catequistas*, in the whole region, played the most important part. We organized among ourselves, held meetings, and afterwards we conquered the *ejidal Comisariados*... We did most the work, and afterwards we convinced the *autoridades*. And we made it.³³⁶

Eight *ejidos* in la Cañada de Soledad took part in the creation of Tierra y Libertad.³³⁷ The pretext of organizing in this region was, as we have seen, transportation.³³⁸ The dream of

³³² Interview with informant 7

³³³ See interview with informant 7 above, and Legorreta 1998, p 92, but also this account by Eduardo Lopez Mendez: “In 1979, they [Lucha Campesina] are well organized, and make their own assemblies, they do not need anybody helping them, they could find their own way without outside help because [by that time] the organization was already established and working.” (Interview with informant 13). Even more to the point: I have interviewed some of the *norteños*, such as Apolinar Oliva, who participated in the process of creating these *ejido* unions. There can be little doubt that outsiders – Hispanics – did participate. (Interviews with informants 8 and 21)

³³⁴ Carlos Lenkersdorf, discussed in the literature section. He came to work with La Castalia through the connexions this latter had with the German, catholic organization Misereor. Academic work aside, Lenkersdorf has meant a whole lot for the people of Tabasco, having worked with them on the Milpa and helped organize and improve the *ejido*. They call him “hermano Carlos”, and asked me about his whereabouts and physical condition constantly. Sadly, I had to respond that brother Carlos is sick due to old age. For the purpose of this thesis I have been in contact with him and his wife through e-mail, but Carlos Lenkersdorf was not fit to give any interviews about his life with *ejido* Tabasco.

³³⁵ Interview with informant 2

³³⁶ Op.cit.

³³⁷ The others were Buenavista Pachan, Chiapas, Cruz del Rosario, Mexiquito, Belisario Dominquez, Rafael Ramirez, and Aquiles Serdan. (Estrada Saavedra 2006)

owning a mean of transportation, thus enabling the movement of people and goods in a region without communication (at the time, only one bus circulated the region of La Soledad, owned by one of the landlords), came true within the first year of the existence of Tierra y libertad. The families of each member community contributed one *toston* – 20 cents – until they had the money to pay for the first communal bus in the area, according to the Tabasqueños.³³⁹

Being able to buy this vehicle, seeing that the work bore fruits, was an experience for the founding members of Tierra y Libertad according to one of the founders:

We went by foot to Mexico City, some 10 or 15 days. And then we returned with the bus, on April 20, 1980. Ah, the joy of the people... We held a party, and people came from other regions to see the bus. It was the beginning... Thus, there were now two big organizations in the municipality of Las Margaritas. And when the two joined forces... Wow, what a joy.³⁴⁰

Tierra y libertad was created, and despite the fact that outsiders helped form the ejido union, this was mainly the work of the indigenous peoples themselves, as also is the case in the forming of other unions in Chiapas around the same time. Some unions were to achieve greater success than others, though. Tierra y Libertad still exists today, but as little more than a shaded memory. The organization was to lose its power, at least in and around ejido Tabasco, in only a few years, and disappeared as an important political and economic factor in the mid 1980s. Padre Ramon Castillo has a theory on why this happened:

Carlos [Lenkersdorf] gave them [Tierra y Libertad] money, through some organizations in Europe. So it never really came from the people, as in other parts of Chiapas, just from some few enthusiasts... But it had no future, because, unlike other places, it was never a mutual, communal struggle, just the few ones. And how could they maintain the bus? They spent the money on other things, including parties.³⁴¹

This reasoning seems an accurate one – Tierra y Libertad was largely funded by the German Catholic organization Misereor thanks to the efforts of Carlos Lenkersdorf, and its hold on Ejido Tabasco did not last long. But this did not necessarily happen because of *the easy access to money* that Padre Ramon Castillo mentions alone. The pretext of transportation had led to formation of the union, but the problem of in-communication was only one of many that the Tojolabales in the region had to face, as Caralampio Cruz Cruz explains:

³³⁸ This becomes even more evident in this interview with some of the founders of Tierra y Libertad in ejido Tabasco: "We said we had to fight for bus transportation from Las Margaritas-Nuevo Momon, because the transportation owners treated us bad in those days." (Estrada Saavedra 2006)

³³⁹ Interview with informant 13. As we will see, Padre Ramon Castillo has another take.

³⁴⁰ Interview with informant 13

³⁴¹ Interview with informant 7. As we have seen, Lenkersdorf worked with la Castalia in the 1970s and -80s.

We bought the bus, because we saw that this was what was most needed. As time went on, some *norteños* came to advise us, they saw the power of the organization. We started applying for an extension of the road that passes through here, we travelled a lot to make them build a new and better one... And then we found that the vehicle did not resolve our problems. In accordance with other leaders, we found that what we needed most was *La madre tierra* – lands. Because without it, we had no place to work.³⁴²

The Tojolabales thus tried to fight for more lands through their new strength as members of a big organization, using lawyers and running from one public office to another. But the immediate success of the fight for better transportation did not reproduce itself in other areas. This had several explanations. One of the major ones is to be found far outside the reach of ejido unions in Chiapas: The redistribution of lands was no longer part of the national project, and was to be abandoned completely throughout the 1980s.³⁴³

This new national policy, combined with the lack of real popular support and efforts behind the very idea of *Tierra y Libertad*, led to the weakening of the union. Combine this with bad leadership³⁴⁴, and it is not hard to understand why *Tierra y Libertad* did not hold all the answers to the problems facing the ejiditarios of ejido Tabasco.³⁴⁵ By the mid-1980s, *Tierra y libertad* had lost most of its influence in the Tojolabal areas. This also happened to many other organizations in Chiapas, due to the same reasons: Lack of success in achieving the goals set³⁴⁶; the governments intents of cooptation,³⁴⁷ the new wave of Protestant groups arriving, looking for indigenous salvation in the sweet hereafter rather than in the earthly life³⁴⁸; bad leadership; and failure to agree on the goals of the big unions. Also, in seeing their goals frustrated and the state attitude towards their effort – either ignoring their demands or repressing them with violence³⁴⁹, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas went looking for new, often more radical, ways to overcome the misery.

³⁴² Interview with informant 2 As we have seen, Ejido Tabasco got the formal right to use the land they applied for in 1959 as late as in 1980. But, as we have seen and as we will see later on, the question of land never ceased to be the source of conflict in Chiapas. At this time, in 1980, according to the National Census only 150 souls were living in Tabasco. This seems improbable, compared to the 174 people registered in the census ten years earlier, and the 337 registered in 1990. I have not found any indication of a decrease in the population in the 1970s, which leads me to think that the census numbers are wrong. Anyway: The increase in the population in Tabasco to a total of 337 in 1990 shows the need for more lands, if only to maintain the quality of life of the earlier decades, seeing as a real (as opposed to the formal presidential decree in 1980, concerning already populated areas) annexing of lands had not taken place after 1969.

³⁴³ Garcia de Leon 2002

³⁴⁴ “The new leaders lacked the capacity, and the meetings were not called.” (Interview with informant 13)

³⁴⁵ “And *tierra y libertad*, which started out very big, is now very small.” (Interview with informant 13)

³⁴⁶ When moving beyond buying the first bus, *Tierra y Libertad* met the wall, as we have seen.

³⁴⁷ “We started working with a man from Tereon, a Nacho. He helped us a lot, but then he changed, tried to get us to work with the government. Then we got rid of him.” (Interview with informant 13)

³⁴⁸ “And then the religious *sextas* – sects – started coming, and they started telling us that organizing was the way of the communist. They created a division in the union, many left to join the *sextas*.” (Interview with informant 13)

³⁴⁹ This coincides with the governorship of Absalon Castellanos (1983-88), brutal in its repression. The complete list of state repression in this period is long, as illustrated by scholars and Tojolabal activists Margarito Ruíz Hernández & Araceli Cal y Mayor. (Ruíz Hernández & Cal y Mayor 2003)

By this time, La Aric was well established in other regions of Chiapas, including parts of Las Margaritas. In la Cañada de Soledad, another big organization was to attract the Tabasqueños.

La CIOAC

La Central Independiente de Organizaciones Indígenas y Campesinas (CIOAC) – the Independent Central of Indigenous and Peasant Organisations – was already an established organization when they came to Chiapas in 1979. It was created in 1964 as an alternative to the official, governmental *Confederación Nacional Campesina* (CNC) – the National Peasant Confederation.³⁵⁰ The organization tried to organize agricultural workers, reform the credit system for the agricultural sector, fight state and international monopolies and prevent the army from intervening in conflicts in the countryside. CIOAC came to Chiapas in 1979, after having been expelled a few years earlier in the same way (and in the very same process) as the norteños of *Línea Proletaria*.

CIOAC differed from La Aric and the norteño advisors in being part of a national organization, in theory under direct command of the leaders in Mexico City.³⁵¹ But more important was the ideological and political differences between La CIOAC and other groups in working in Chiapas at the time: CIOAC was communist, and worked within the political system as supporters of different leftist parties, as well as organizing labour unions for the peasant, indigenous population of Chiapas. Thus, their struggle was not an underground one (as opposed to *Unión del Pueblo*, at least in theory a clandestine organization upon its arrival in Chiapas), something that led them to open confrontation with the government.³⁵²

CIOAC was established in the area of Simojovel, which was to be its stronghold in the 1980s. From their base there, they sought to expand their area of influence. They came in contact with *Ejido Tabasco* and *Tierra y Libertad* on a special occasion:

³⁵⁰ See chapter 4 on the Cardenista project, where the introduction of this organisation is discussed.

³⁵¹ Even though CIOAC in Chiapas developed a rather autonomous relationship with the leadership in the capital, "because they were looking to answer the regional needs. Never under the direct influence of the national leaders, they managed to be received by the Chiapanecos. Thus, while national CIOAC work with production projects, in Chiapas the organization fought for redistribution of lands". (Montellano García 2001, p 160)

³⁵² This confrontation line caused the death of more than one member of CIOAC. The most infamous case was that of Andulio Galvez Velasquez, member of the state council of la CIOAC and the communist PSUM – *Partido Socialista Unificado de Mexico*. He was murdered by people "close to Ernesto Castellanos Dominguez (brother of governor Absalon Castellanos and member of "La familia Chiapaneca)." (Ruíz Hernández & Cal y Mayor 2003, p 255)

In 1980, while we were celebrating the arrival of the bus, a delegation from La CIOAC approached and asked if we wanted to join them. They told us about their project, that they were present in Chiapas but not so much in this region, and they wanted Lucha Campesina and Tierra y libertad to join. But we said no, we wanted to keep on working with our organizations. But they had found the door, and kept on opening it, they never gave up.³⁵³

This seems to be emblematic of the expansion of CIOAC in Las Margaritas. In the early 1980s they started gaining ground here, both as an organization and with their political allies in *Partido Socialista Unificado de Mexico* – The Mexican Unified Socialist Party – (PSUM) (and later PT – the Workers Party). By responding to the needs of the communities, first and foremost the need for more and better land, they attracted many different groups and ejido unions to their project. Also ejido Tabasco found the strong and well organized CIOAC to attractive to resist: “Finally, we reached an agreement, and the three organizations – CIOAC, Tierra y libertad and Lucha Campesina – were tied together.”³⁵⁴

CIOAC was, as we have seen, in open conflict with the local government. In the early 1980s, when Tabasco and Tierra y Libertad joined the organization, they had started to occupy land in regions where they had a strong influence. In the communities associated with CIOAC, two strategies were developed:

1. The political approach: mass meetings, demonstrations, strikes and use of the media.
2. The more traditional approach of capacitating: self-defence (both culturally and material and the hiding of leaders and others wanted by the police or the pistoleros of the finqueros.

In this period, governor Juan Sabines had taken on a new project of land distribution in Chiapas. The state government bought land and sold it, at a fair price, to communities in need of more land. CIOAC opposed this policy, mainly because much of the land that was bought by the government was already applied for by different indigenous or other rural communities under article 27³⁵⁵ of the constitution. Thus, this new policy of Sabines created only more tension. But this new governmental project helped CIOAC gain strength, as CNC – The National Peasant Confederation – in trying to get the communities to go along with this strategy disclosed itself as being servants of the government in the eyes of the indigenous population. And this was not a good time for organizations wanting to win over the ejidos in Chiapas to be associated with the government. State repression

³⁵³ Interview with informant 13

³⁵⁴ Interview with informant 13

³⁵⁵ See chapter 4, about the Cardenista reforms

got ever more vile. The region was militarized in 1982. Local finqueros, helped by public policemen, responded to the more aggressive strategy of CIOAC by using more violence.

Repression was converted into one of the systematic methods of the corporative Chiapans to control the independent peasant organizations. In accordance with the local caciques, the authorities tried to maintain the social and economic structure, more than anything in order to protect land ownership.³⁵⁶

These attempts of protecting the landowners faced, in la Cañada de Soledad, a powerful enemy in CIOAC, gaining strength as the other organizations in the region lost influence. In the words of Eduardo Lopez Mendez: “La CIOAC is like the lizard. It swallows everything... Even though everything is falling apart, there is a mother and a father: La CIOAC. And they get stronger and stronger.”³⁵⁷

Ejido Tabasco and CIOAC

In August 1985, the Tabasqueños occupied the remaining lands of the finquero of the finca Medellin. All members of the ejido, women, children and men, left their houses and milpas for days, building tents and provisional houses on the lands belonging to Cesar Solis.³⁵⁸

This action was a mutual struggle, decided among all the ejidos belonging to CIOAC in la Cañada de Soledad. The land occupation was to last for some 20 days before the police came, at the request of the finca owner Cesar Solis.³⁵⁹ This is how the Tabasqueños remembers the land occupation:

We decided in a meeting in Comitán that we had to occupy the lands. We were there, in the camp, working the lands, only some 15 days, when the cabrones landowners got together and, with the help of the police and armed landowners managed to throw us away. And we ran away, we had nothing with which to protect us, it was a civil uprising, unarmed.³⁶⁰

It seems that, because of family quarrels within the landowners in the Solis family, the Tabasqueños were able to hold the land for a longer period than what could be expected. Padre Ramon Castillo did not participate in the event, but gives the following account:

The Solis brothers were fighting, so the other left Cesar Solis to himself. That way, they could not receive the Tabasqueños with arms, like they had done before³⁶¹... The police wanted to throw them out, but when

³⁵⁶ Montellano García 2001, p 191

³⁵⁷ Interview with informant 13

³⁵⁸ I have found one reference: “1985, July: En Simojovel [sic], 2000 [sic. Must be wrong, 200 seems more plausible] policemen and 35 finqueros and pistoleros Medellin and La Soledad, occupied by peones wanting better payment.” (Montellano García 2001, p 214)

³⁵⁹ Interview with informant 13

³⁶⁰ Interview with informant 2

³⁶¹ According to Padre Ramon Castillo, in the process leading to the creation of Tierra y libertad, when the Comisariado was imprisoned, the people of la Cañada de Soledad came together and demonstrated against the capture of the Comisariado. They marched on Medellin, some 3 or 4000 of them, and were received with the firing of arms. Seeing as I have no other source for this (nobody seems to remember, or does not want to talk about it), I have chosen to leave this out. Still, it deserves to be mentioned, at least in this context, where the Padre talks about how the Solis could not use firearms *this* time. (Interview with informant 7)

they got there, the Tabasqueños had left, only to return when the police had left. And Solis did not have enough money to pay the police over and over again...”³⁶²

The last sentence in the quote above is an interesting one. Did the landowners have to pay the police to come help them against the occupiers? There are accounts of this happening in similar situations in other parts of Chiapas. CIOAC used land occupation on a regular basis in those days, thus giving the police a lot of work. It does not, then, seem unlikely that the landowners had to pay for protection. Finally, though, the police managed to chase the occupants off the land. The camps set up on the occupied lands were burned together with the tools and food that was left in the camp as the Tabasqueños left fleeing.³⁶³ In interview, Cesar Solis, landowner at the time, claims that he does not remember any quarrels over land with the Tabasqueños, only with neighbouring ejidos, bordering his property. When asked specifically about the event of summer 1985, he admits that there were some “minor problems”.³⁶⁴ That this event took place is, however, certain. Not only is it in accordance with the CIOAC strategy in the 1980s all over its area of influence in Chiapas, there is also this section from leftwing newspaper *La Jornada*:

August 6 and 7, 1985: 200 policemen from Seguridad Publica and 35 finqueros and their pistoleros make a violent removal of the Tojolabales from the communities of Buena Vista Pachán, Tabasco and Chiapas, in Las Margaritas. Functionaries from the Secretaria de Desarrolla Rural del Estado were involved. The police and pistoleros were transported in trucks in the property of the finqueros.³⁶⁵

Other than this episode, it seems the Tabasqueños were not part of any major conflicts in the 1980s. As we have seen, Tierra y Libertad lost strength, and the CIOAC battleground was not really centred around the region of ejido Tabasco. And as we saw in the governmental report from ejido Tabasco in 1988 (see page 48): A school building existed in the community, but was not completed. The children never got a sufficient education there. The ejiditarios in Tabasco were still cut off from the outside world, and left with, at least according to their own accounts, too little land. The Tabasqueños applied for new lands in 1969, but the process never reached a conclusion. By 1988 and the presidency of Salinas de Gortari (1988-1994), land redistribution within the ejido system was no longer a priority of the Mexican government, as we will see in the next chapter.

³⁶² Interview with informant 15

³⁶³ Interview with informant 3.2

³⁶⁴ Interview with informant 14

³⁶⁵ Quoted in Ruiz Hernandez & Cal y Mayor 2003, p 254

CIOAC and regional politics

CIOAC, and thus the Tabasqueños, supported the left leaning PRD party in the regional elections in Las Margaritas from its creation in the aftermath of the 1988 presidential elections.³⁶⁶ From the 1970s to the creation of PRD, CIOAC affiliated with leftwing parties such as PSUM. Until the 2002 elections, they never won – even though accusations of fraud surrounded many of the PRI election victories.³⁶⁷ This led to frustration. “No matter what we did, we could not win. The patrones and the political elites kept us out of power”, says Martin Mendez Lopez in ejido Tabasco.³⁶⁸ This frustration would, of course, make it easier for the Zapatistas to win over the Tabasqueños for a different kind of struggle.

The republic of the Masses

We have seen in this chapter how outsiders, the norteños, came to Chiapas from 1974 trying to create a vanguard for the Revolution in Mexico based on Maoist ideas of attacking the centre from the periphery and educating the masses and waiting for the right moment – the moment when the correlation of forces is in your favour. The moment never arrived, not for these groups anyway. But these norteños did radicalize the situation in Chiapas, by getting the government to show its ugly face of repression and by organizing what Estrada calls the “republic mass community” in cooperation with the indigenous peoples themselves, as we have seen in the case of Tabasco.³⁶⁹

But as was the case of the pastoral work in Chiapas, the political project of the leftist movements such as Union del Pueblo, Linea Proletaria and CIOAC, notwithstanding the differences between them, had some limitations. The message was sharpened and organizational structures created, and land was occupied. But the organizations had little to offer other than rhetoric and promises of a prolonged fight with political means when the government met their demands with a negative response or repression. It is of course possible that, in time, these political projects could have led to results if left to themselves and enabled to work on with the communities. But this we will never know. For when the Tabasqueños were busy occupying lands together with other CIOAC members, another movement had already come to Chiapas, planning an armed revolution.

³⁶⁶ Those elections ended with the PRI candidate winning, but loud protests of fraud were heard.

³⁶⁷ Estrada Saavedra 2007. That year (which is not within the period of study of this paper) also marked another important milestone: For the first time a Tojolabal became municipal president in Las Margaritas.

³⁶⁸ Interview with informant 3

³⁶⁹ Although it must be said that this feature was more pre-eminent in the regions where CIOAC was not as powerful as in La Cañada de Soledad. See figure 6.1, appendix 4, for more about how this Republic of the masses was structured – by the Maoist groups such as Linea Proletaria and Union del Pueblo more than the action and election orientated CIOAC communities.

Chapter 7: EZLN comes to Chiapas

If for the Maoist groups arriving in Chiapas in the 1970s taking up arms was an option, for the latest newcomer – taking the name Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) – the armed uprising was the definite solution. We will in the following deal with the presence of this movement in Chiapas, and how this organization influenced life in ejido Tabasco.

National context

In the 1980s, after a debt crisis, Mexico was to become one of the golden boys of the neo-liberal economic re-structuring imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF).³⁷⁰ Beginning in the aftermath of the debt crisis, Mexico took on, in the presidencies of Miguel de Madrid (1982 – 1988) and Salinas de Gortari (1988 – 1994), a path of neo-liberal politics that led to economic growth, opening the economy for foreign investments and privatizations.³⁷¹ After a decade of such “open” economic policy, Mexico, in 1993, was accepted as a member of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The following year, January 1, 1994, Mexico entered the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) agreement with USA and Canada. President Salinas de Gortari was often mentioned among the favourites to become the next president of the World Trade Organization (WTO).³⁷² Mexico was “ready to enter the First world”.³⁷³

The process of economic growth in the 1980s came at a price. One of the obstacles to overcome in adapting Mexico to a free trade and open economy was the ejido system, inscribed in the Revolutionary constitution in 1917 and brought to life by Lazaro Cardenas in the 1930s. Thus, in 1992, article 27 of the constitution of 1917 was reformed.³⁷⁴ The neo-liberal economic policy that was initialized in 1982 was a break from the revolution rhetoric that had been the trademark of PRI since the 1930s – even though, as we have seen on the topic of land redistribution (see chapter 4), rhetoric and reality did not always coincide in the fifty years separating post-revolutionary Mexico and the debt crisis in 1982. But still, theory was that land redistribution was to take place within the framework of the ejido system. The reform of article 27 meant an absolute change, dramatical in rural Chiapas, where the population was still seeking expansion of their ejidos. Now, land

³⁷⁰ According to Tello Diaz 2005

³⁷¹ Garcia de Leon 2003

³⁷² Garcia de Leon 2005. He was the Clinton administration's candidate for the job.

³⁷³ Escalante Gonzalbo et.al 2005, and Garcia de Leon 2005

³⁷⁴ See chapter 4 for more on article 27

redistribution in Mexico was going to take place through buying and selling, according to the reformed article 27. And the ejido system was considered an obstacle for progress and prosperity – small units meant small scale production, thus giving Mexico a handicap in international commerce.³⁷⁵

The reform of article 27 did not, however, mean that president Carlos Salinas de Gortari had forgotten about Chiapas. He invested millions in aid and credit programmes in the state of Chiapas, through governmental programs *Pronasol* and *Solidaridad*.

These programs did not manage to change the desperate situation in rural Chiapas. It seems that el subcomandante insurgente Marcos – the Zapatista leader – won the battle of narratives when he described the presidential programmes like this in 1992:

You will see another magnificent construction with the noble symbol of SOLIDARIDAD printed on the façade. Do not look at it, I ask you to turn away, do not notice the fact that this building is... A prison (evil tongues claim that such are the advantages that Pronasol offer: Now the peasants will not have to go all the way to Cerro Hueco, the prison in the state capital [of Tuxtla Gutierrez])³⁷⁶

A small-scale political awakening

As we have seen, many leftist political activists went underground after the massacre of Tlatelolco in 1968. Government repression within the framework of the institutional revolution – hence the name PRI³⁷⁷ – was tough in the 1970s, without ever catching the attention of the outside world, contrary to many of the military regimes in other countries of Latin America.³⁷⁸ But this *perfect dictatorship*, as Peruvian writer Mario Vargas Llosa described the Mexican system of corporativism and repression mixed with a progressive face shown to the outside world, would not last forever.³⁷⁹

According to scholars Patricia King and Francisco Javier Villanueva the first breach in the “perfect” PRI system became obvious during the catastrophic earthquake that hit Mexico City in 1985.³⁸⁰ Because of the late and incompetent reaction by the official law, order and first aid institutions, citizens themselves came together and organized ad hoc in small, autonomous neighbourhood rescue teams. When normality returned after weeks of trying to rescue victims of the earthquake and securing buildings, the organizational structures created during the disaster had shown people that organization was possible. Still following King and Villanueva: The organization in 1985 was to become the

³⁷⁵ Garcia de Leon 2002

³⁷⁶ *Chiapas: el sureste en dos vientos...*, in EZLN, 2003. Marcos is taking the reader for an imaginary ride through Chiapas, hence the references to movement in the quote.

³⁷⁷ Partido Revolucionario Institucional

³⁷⁸ Such as Pinochet's Chile and general Viuda in Argentina

³⁷⁹ El Pais, 1990

³⁸⁰ Numbers differ. Officially, around 10 000 people died in the earthquake. Other sources claim the numbers reached more than 35 000.

organizational base of the left-centre candidacy of Cuauhtémoc Cárdenas, grandson of ejido reform father Lazaro Cardenas, in the presidential campaign in 1988.³⁸¹

Cuauhtémoc Cardenas lost the 1988 election to Carlos Salinas de Gortari by the smallest margin.³⁸² Cries of fraud rose in the aftermath of the election. Salinas de Gortari and PRI remained in power, but had been challenged for the first time. The PRI was to lose its grip on Mexico throughout the 1990s. After the 1988 elections, both PAN – *Partido Accion Nacional*, Party for National Accion – and PRD – *Partido de la Revolucion Democratica*, Party of the Democratic Revolution, created on the remains of the Cardenas movement after the 1988 elections – became serious challengers to the PRI one-party rule.³⁸³

EZLN comes to the Lacandon jungle – some remarks on the origins of EZLN

In 1983, in mid-November, representatives of the *Fuerzas de Liberacion Nacional* (FLN) – The National Liberation Forces – reached the Lacandon jungle and made up their first camp. On this 17th of November 1983, two Chiapan natives of indigenous origin – Frank and Javier – and three urban, hispanic militants of the FLN – Comandante German, Elisa y Rodolfo – established the Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN) – the Zapatista army for National Liberation, as the southern division of the FLN.³⁸⁴ According to the original plan of the FLN, EZLN was to be just one in a national web of guerrillas that was to undertake an ambitious project: making the socialist revolution through the violent takeover of the Mexican government.³⁸⁵

In the mid-eighties, one Sebastian Rafael Guillen Vicente from the northern state of Tamaulipas joined the EZLN forces in Chiapas, holding the rank of captain. Guillen was to become the regional leader in the late 1980s, with the rank of *subcomandante* – under-commander, meaning he had to take orders from *comandante* German – one Fernando Yañez, the national leader of the FLN.³⁸⁶ The world was to know Rafael Guillen as *el subcomandante Marcos* in 1994.³⁸⁷

³⁸¹ King & Villanueva 1998

³⁸² Official numbers gave 50.36% for Salinas and 31.12% for Cardenas. (Secretaria de Gobernacion 1988)

³⁸³ Garcia de Leon 2005. This process culminated with right-centre party (PAN) winning the 2000 elections. That, however, is a different story, where the Zapatista uprising is one of many important forces leading to this historic change in Mexican politics.

³⁸⁴ Tello Diaz 2005

³⁸⁵ FLN were supposed to establish divisions in all of the central regions of Mexico and in the north, in the state of Chihuahua. (Tello Diaz 2005)

³⁸⁶ And thus not, as many believe, because Marcos is *subcomandante* to the indigenous comandantes.

³⁸⁷ Tello Diaz 2005, and de la Grange & Rico 2005

Some disturbing remarks along the way – EZLN and the traditional left

Before we move on, I would like to mention a few facts that are well known, but remarkably little discussed among the apologists of Zapatismo (see chapter 2).

EZLN has used a rhetoric of indigenous struggle, of seeking a place for the indigenous peasant population in the Mexican national project, ever since the armed uprising in 1994. Their message is one of democracy and plurality.³⁸⁸ Subcomandante Marcos is, as mentioned, known as the joker, the clown, the intellectual revolutionary, the armed poet, because of his poems, shorts stories and poetic declarations.³⁸⁹ Régis Debray, the French philosopher and Latin America specialist, even called Marcos “the greatest Latin American writer of our time”.³⁹⁰ All this may be true, and I would, if that was the focal point of this thesis, actually argue that EZLN did change in the encounter with the indigenous peoples in Chiapas. But this is not the rhetoric offered by EZLN when the movement settled in the Lacandon jungle. Rather, the discourse of the FLN – or, in its Chiapan uniform: EZLN – was one of traditional, socialist guerrilla, not unlike the ones active in Central America at the time. From the statutes of the FLN (written in 1980): “The FLN is a political-military organization whose objective is the rural and urban worker takeover of political power in the Mexican republic, to install a popular republic with a socialist system.”³⁹¹

And, even more to the point:

[The FLN shall strive to] integrate the struggles of the urban proletariat with the struggles of the peasants and indigenous peoples of the most exploited areas of our country and form the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional.³⁹²

There is little doubt, then, that EZLN was created by and operated under orders of the national leadership of the FLN, as an integrated part of this organization. Subcomandante Marcos himself acknowledges this, in an interview with French scholar Yvon Le Bot in 1997.³⁹³ This is not the focal point of this thesis, but the origins of Zapatismo do have some

³⁸⁸ See, for instance, *Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*, the document read aloud in the conquered town squares and published in newspapers immediately after the uprising in 1994: “We are the product of 500 years of repression” is clearly a reference to indigenous struggle. Notwithstanding, and more in accordance with the point here: The first time the Zapatistas speak directly about being an indigenous project is in the *Segunda Declaración de la Selva Lacandona*, published in June 1994. (both documents in EZLN 2003)

³⁸⁹ See, for instance, how Marcos is portrayed by Spanish writer Montealban, briefly touched in the literature discussion in chapter 1. (Montealban 1999)

³⁹⁰ Proceso 1995

³⁹¹ En Tello Diaz 2005

³⁹² Op.cit.

³⁹³ Le Bot 1997. Even in the days following the uprising, some of the insurgents spoke openly to the press about fighting for the socialist revolution. They were soon quieted, and this discourse disappeared from the Zapatista horizon. (Tello Diaz 2005, page 234). It may seem an exaggeration to include all this information about the origins of the EZLN. I choose to do so because many people deny this connection between the FLN and EZLN, thinking, I believe, that such a bond to a traditional socialist movement ruins the image of EZLN as something new (see discussion on literature, chapter 1). On the other hand, I do not wish to imply that the

implications on the way the project should be viewed. How much does the indigenous base of the movements know about this pre-planned project? How much influence did the Tabasqueños and other Zapatistas have on the outcome of the project? This will be discussed throughout this chapter.

Spreading the message

As we have seen in the previous chapters: Chiapas was a state where outside actors had been present for decades when the Zapatistas arrived. What the newly arrived guerrilleros found in Chiapas was a fertile soil for radical ideas, but also competition from the existing projects and struggles. EZLN operated underground in the first years in the region, during which all the activity took place inside the Lacandon jungle. Slowly, the Zapatistas tried to get in touch with close by communities. This account by compañero Gerardo in the Zapatista anniversary book *20 y 10* gives an impression of how the first contact was made (Compañero Gerardo says he got in contact with the organization in 1984. That is early – most communities, even among the first ones, were recruited from the mid-1980s). Compañero Gerardo shows in this account how the communities came to enter – that some social leaders were the first ones to be contacted, and from them the word of the new organization spread to the rest of the people in the community:

I was recruited by one of my brothers. He started talking to me [about EZLN] on one of his journeys [to the insurgents camps]. First we heard about the reasons for the fights, they told us two simple things [...] because the ones that recruited us also had means of security and they never gave away all at once. Now, when you decide to do the job, then, on the journeys, you start to learn, but you have to be dedicated before you reach the point of learning. My community is one of the first to help the organization. We entered in 1984. Not all of the people entered at first, but later we organized everyone, and then the insurgents could come to our community and feel protected. That is how we reach the point of war.³⁹⁴

Also worth noticing is how very cautious the guerrilleros were in approaching potential members, how they “had their means of security”. This shows the level of dedication to the project: EZLN had come to the Lacandon jungle to stay for a while. Considering the young

Zapatista project has not changed when confronted with the indigenous peoples of Chiapas. The problem I, as a student of the movement, have is that this discussion is pretty much ignored by the two tendencies in the literature on Zapatismo described in chapter 1, page 10. It seems that, to many scholars, EZLN has to be either a traditional leftist guerrilla, or that this part of the organization’s history must be kept a secret. Personally, I have no doubts that EZLN has changed a lot over the more the two decades the movement has been in Chiapas, and that the indigenous level of participation in creating what the Zapatistas stand for today has been an important factor. I will get back to this in chapter 8, the conclusion of this thesis.

³⁹⁴ Muñoz Ramirez 2003. This is a book with interviews with Zapatistas, celebrating the 20th anniversary of the arrival in the jungle and the 10th anniversary of the armed rebellion. The book is written by Zapatista follower Gloria Muñoz, and serves more as a document on the self perception of the Zapatistas than a source of balanced information. Notwithstanding, the book offers many interesting perspectives and accounts.

age of many of urban members of the movement who settled down in Chiapas, it is fair to say that they were willing to sacrifice their lives to EZLN.³⁹⁵

After the first initial contacts, the Zapatistas started including the indigenous population in their project. Even at this early point (Geraldo speaks of 1984 still), secrecy was important. Only little by little, after having been tutored on means of security and, in cases, tested for loyalty, did the indigenous members get to see the full resources of the guerrilla in the making.³⁹⁶

We saw when the organization of the Ejercito Zapatista began working in the villages. We first learned methods of security, because if there is no security, you cannot do anything. [...] We learned more or less where the camps were located.³⁹⁷

But this does not explain how the Zapatistas could spread the word from community to community, until being able to yield an army of some 6000 soldiers ten years later. For this, which we also will discuss in the case of ejido Tabasco and Zapatismo in this chapter, we need to know who the people the Zapatistas made their initial contacts with normally where. More often than not, we find that they are the catequistas, trained by the Catholic Church, and hence: by the diocese of San Cristobal.³⁹⁸

With a little help from my friends?

It seems plausible that the good relations they maintained with the Diocese of San Cristobal helped the Zapatistas in these early stages of Chiapan presence. According to the writers of the book *Marcos: La genial impostura*, the FLN was even originally invited to the region by bishop Samuel Ruiz himself. The bishop wanted someone to help the communities defend against the ever growing repression of the local authorities.³⁹⁹ Padre Ramon Castillo of La Castalia also speaks of the close relationship between the diocese and the insurgents, though not indicating any formal cooperation between the two.⁴⁰⁰ Many sources follow the same track, talking about how the projects of church and insurgents

³⁹⁵ Tello Diaz offers a profile on many of the key members of EZLN. They are mostly students, middle class and in their mid-20s when they make the move to Chiapas. (Tello Diaz 2005)

³⁹⁶ For this – and more specifically on how the Zapatistas train their soldiers in the mountains etc – Carlos Imaz has written an interesting book: *Rompiendo el silencio. Biografía de un insurgente del EZLN*. It is a fictional book, but the features and many of the people described are supposed to be accurate. (Imaz 2004) I lean some on his work in this section.

³⁹⁷ Muños Ramirez 2003

³⁹⁸ It needs to be mentioned here that although this process of contact was initiated by the Zapatistas, their message would be analyzed by, and to a certain degree adapted to, the indigenous communities that decided, as active subjects, to join the movement. I will come back to this, but mention it here to avoid being misunderstood as claiming that the only active subject here is EZLN.

³⁹⁹ de la Grange & Rico 2005, and Tello Diaz 2005

⁴⁰⁰ Interview with informant 7. "They were here, you know. All of them, here, in La Castalia. And many of the indigenous leaders of the EZ were my students." (Interview with informant 7)

coincide at least in interest.⁴⁰¹ Also, just looking at the Zapatista stronghold in geographic terms is useful: It is almost identical with the different regions of influence that were created by the diocese of San Cristobal in 1966 (page 56). And: The Zapatista communities are, almost without exception, Catholic. The Protestant communities in the region were not receptive to the Zapatista project.⁴⁰²

And then there is the role of the catequistas. The Zapatista camps and training fields were centred around the region of ejido Tierra y Libertad⁴⁰³ – where the catequistas in the region were won over by the Zapatistas. This enabled EZLN to, little by little, spread their influence and basically take over the key positions of La Aric.⁴⁰⁴ That the catequistas were the first to join does not, however, prove that the diocese was directly involved in the Zapatista project in Chiapas. As we have seen people holding this position were the natural leaders. One conclusion that could be drawn from this is that EZLN, just as the different leftist movements who came to Chiapas some ten years before the Zapatistas, found fertile land for their radical project in Chiapas. But it is also true that the above mentioned social movements – the norteros, as we have come to know them – did lay some foundations, together with the diocese of San Cristobal, that would enable the Zapatista message to spread relatively fast. As subcomandante Daniel, who was to desert in 1993, before the uprising, says in an interview: “Normally it was easy [to explain the Zapatista fight to the communities], because one has to remember that these people already were more or less politically capacitated.”⁴⁰⁵

Gaining strength

Established in the jungle region, EZLN started spreading the message of a new movement, mainly in the poorly communicated areas of the Lacandon jungle. The process of accumulating forces gained strength and speed from around 1988.⁴⁰⁶

At this time, in the late 1980s, the Zapatistas had already started purchasing arms, preparing for war. Most of the guns were bought at the black market in the US, by the urban members of the movement. They were paid for by the indigenous members and their

⁴⁰¹ de la Grange & Rico 2005, Tello Diaz 2005, Legorreta 1998, for instance

⁴⁰² Estrada Saavedra 2006

⁴⁰³ This ejido should not be confused with the ejidal union of Tierra y Libertad discussed in chapter 6. Tierra y Libertad means Land and Freedom, and was the cry of the original Zapatistas during the Mexican Revolution. Ever since, government rhetoric and social movements have used the original Zapatistas as symbols and references.

⁴⁰⁴ Tello Diaz 2005

⁴⁰⁵ de la Grange & Rico 1999

⁴⁰⁶ Op.cit.

small surplus after selling their products. There are no evidence that the EZLN ever dealt with drugs to make money to maintain the organization – it was mainly the indigenous members and their work that helped the movement survive.⁴⁰⁷

Whereas the organization of FLN was virtually non-existent in other parts of the country except for the headquarters and urban members in Mexico City, Marcos could prove to his superiors – with parades and practices – that EZLN was a force to be recognized. This was to be showcased in the 1992 demonstrations against the 500 years celebration of the arrival of Columbus in San Cristobal. Here, the Zapatistas, though at this point not formerly recognized as such in public, tore down the statue of Spanish conqueror Matamoros in what was supposed to show the FLN and the other, competing organizations the real potential of EZLN.⁴⁰⁸ At this point, EZLN had already bypassed La Aric and CIOAC in influence because of a rapid growth over the last four or so years, and the question was when war was going to be declared. In the words of Compañero Gerardo:

We saw how the work developed and how, later on, our struggle was changing as the communities gained strength. In the beginning, almost 20 years ago, one *miliciano* – private – would leave one village [to join the organization], then two milicianos and then, later, would receive some training, and as they became more the work started changing. If there were five milicianos, then maybe one *insurgente* – higher ranking – would come from that same village. I mean to say that it happened step by step, not fast, maintaining the struggle, helping the struggle. This is how it all grew. Before 1994, we saw that we had accumulated force, it could be seen that it really was, that there now was *un chingo* – plenty of us.⁴⁰⁹

By that time, the Zapatistas had, under the command of subcomandante Pedro⁴¹⁰, already made contact with the people in ejido Tabasco.

Zapatismo comes to ejido Tabasco

The first contacts between EZLN and ejido Tabasco – as with the rest of the communities in la Cañada de Soledad – were not unlike the ones described by Compañero Gerardo: Someone thought to be trustworthy in the community was contacted by the Zapatistas, and given some information about the organization.⁴¹¹ Nobody but the one contacted was to know, not even the closest family. When absence from the community was required – in

⁴⁰⁷ Tello Diaz 2005. Actually, there rather are compelling evidence that the Zapatistas did not make a profit from the Cannabis fields in Chiapas. Ex-guerillero “Enrique” even told me that he himself witnessed how one urban member of the FLN was sentenced to death for having bought and consumed marihuana. The movement was extremely preoccupied with not being attached to criminal patterns, unlike for instance FARC in Colombia. (Interview with informant 20)

⁴⁰⁸ Tello Diaz 2005, and de la Grange & Rico 2005

⁴⁰⁹ Muñoz Ramirez 2003

⁴¹⁰ One of three Subcomandantes in EZLN: Marcos; Pedro; and Daniel. The two latter answered to Marcos, who in turn answered only to Comandante German in Mexico City. Daniel was to desert the Zapatistas in 1993, in part because of disagreements with Marcos (de la Grange & Rico 1999). Pedro, responsible for the region of Las Margaritas, was to be killed in the take-over of the municipal capital in 1994, as we will see.

⁴¹¹ On this process in other communities in the region, see Estrada Saavedra 2006 b

case of a big reunion with EZLN, for instance – these pioneers in every community would have to make up an excuse – like going off to work some far away finca to make money – to be able to go.⁴¹²

In the case of ejido Tabasco, Eduardo Lopez Mendez and a few other catequistas were approached and inquired by fellow catequistas – whom they knew from diocese projects – from communities that already were established Zapatistas about the chances of ejido Tabasco joining EZLN. This happened in the late 1980s, according to my informants.⁴¹³ At this time, ejido Tabasco was integrated in CIOAC and, at least formally, Union de ejidos Tierra y Libertad (see chapter 6). Politically they also maintained formal ties with the newly founded PRD through the CIOAC membership. Eduardo Lopez Mendez explains the first contacts in this way: “They started to visit us, bringing the message of a new, different organization. A closed one. And they had explicit goals, new ways of changing things, of making the government listen to us.”⁴¹⁴

After an initial period of discussions among the few chosen ones (who also would have to go to bigger meetings in the organization), the message was brought to the whole community.

Before we discuss that process: It is worth mentioning that joining EZLN did not indicate a whole new way of thinking or living in ejido Tabasco. The community was already politically organized, so joining EZLN meant only sharpening the message and adapting to a more dedicated movement, informants say.⁴¹⁵ This is important: It shows that EZLN could harvest the fruits of the political structures discussed in this thesis.⁴¹⁶ At the same time, this is proof of the level of political sophistication in ejido Tabasco.

⁴¹² Estrada Saavedra 2006 b. Whether these means of security were always successful is of course a different matter. The Tabasqueños heard of EZLN for the first time in 1985, still years before the first few were contacted. (Interview with informant 3)

⁴¹³ This I base on the interviews with informants 16 and 3. But my informants vary a lot on this. Some claim that formal contact was made with EZLN only after the armed rebellion in 1994 – which is an outright lie, and not even a consequent one: the same source has given me many different accounts on this. (Field observations in ejido Tabasco, May & June 2007). For this, the first contact with EZLN, I find support in Estrada Saavedra’s account of Zapatismo in neighbouring ejido Buenavista Pachan, and thus feel comfortable in dating this happening to around 1990.

⁴¹⁴ Interview with informant 15

⁴¹⁵ Interview with informant 15

⁴¹⁶ In European journalists de la Grange and Maite Rico’s interview with Salvador Morales Garibay – or subcomandante Daniel – this quote is of interest: “The capacitating that the bishop Samuel Ruiz [gave] the catequistas is invaluable [for the Zapatistas], if it had not existed there would not have such a growth nor capacity for action for EZLN.” (de la Grange & Rico 1999)

Joining the armed struggle

Ejido Tabasco decided to join EZLN as an entire community in an assembly, where every man and woman in the ejido participated, in 1990.⁴¹⁷ One of the reasons why ejido Tabasco joined the EZLN struggle according to the social leaders, is the similarity to the projects they already had undertaken. The fight and goals of EZLN are shared by CIOAC, and both are just two different paths leading to the same goal: Lands, respect, a prosperous future.⁴¹⁸ The leaders of the community felt, as did the leaders in other ejidos, that the pacific path had come to an end.⁴¹⁹ Ejido Tabasco was created in the 1930s. 60 years later, after having walked with the Catholic Church, the *norteños* and the political organizations – ejidal unions and more explicit political organizations such as CIOAC – it was time to try something new. Of great importance is also the fact that CIOAC, as an organization, decided to join the EZLN project. “We were all tired of demonstrations, meeting, road blocks. We never saw any results, and we felt that this option was something new. So we said: Come on, let’s join them.”⁴²⁰

EZLN had 11 concrete demands⁴²¹ when rising up in arms in 1994, demands that were at that point well established in the communities. “These demands coincide with those of CIOAC”, informants in ejido Tabasco say.⁴²²

One note on what the Zapatistas promised the Tabasqueños before they decided to join: It is a common complaint from those criticising EZLN that they promised gold and paradise in order to get new members.⁴²³ This is not at all the impression I got from ejido Tabasco. Granted, EZLN did not speak of the revolution, nor of socialism, according to my sources. But all they really could – and did – promise was a new way of struggle, one that would take a lot of hard work and sacrifice.⁴²⁴

One other aspect worth mentioning is that of, once again, the *cacique*. This is an ever-present factor in rural Chiapas, and so also in this case. Accounts of how the leaders wanted to join EZLN and thus got their fellow ejiditarios to admit to a concept they may even have known very little about are not uncommon. I have no direct sources claiming

⁴¹⁷ See footnote 413

⁴¹⁸ Interview with informant 2

⁴¹⁹ Interview with informant 3

⁴²⁰ Estrada Saavedra 2006 b

⁴²¹ “Work, lands, roofs, food, health, educacion, independence, freedom, democracy, justice and peace”. (Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona, in EZLN 2003)

⁴²² Interviews with informants 2, 3, and 13

⁴²³ Estrada Saavedra quotes the following from ejido Buena Vista Pachan: “when the Revolution triumphs”, said one Zapatista veteran, “they told us that there would be land repartitions, houses for everyone and everything the farmer needs; but (all this) only when our fight is over”. (Estrada Saavedra 2006 b)

⁴²⁴ Interviews with informants 2, 3, and 16

that this was the case also in ejido Tabasco, but having observed the ejidal assembly and thus how (some of) the social leaders use their position and the advantage of having more information than the rest to impose their opinion, I am in no position to say it was not so in the encounter with Zapatismo.⁴²⁵

Zapatismo in ejido Tabasco

We helped each other mutually, because what we [the communities] did not know, they [the insurgents] knew. We needed to know things we did not know, and they, too, needed things from us, and that is how we started doing things.⁴²⁶

This is how *compañero* Gerardo, who as we have seen joined EZLN in 1984, describes the relationship between the indigenous base of the Zapatista movement and the (almost exclusively hispanic) leaders. When the Tabasqueños joined collectively in the early 1990s, the project of EZLN was established, thus meaning that ejido Tabasco would not have much influence over the organizational structures of EZLN.⁴²⁷ As in neighbouring ejido Buena Vista Pachan, social life in ejido Tabasco came to revolve around new functions such and promoters of education and health.⁴²⁸ These functions had to be established in the community due to EZLN orders. It meant that people – chosen by the assembly – in ejido Tabasco had to undergo some classes not unlike those of the catequistas in La Castalia to be able to teach reading and writing as well as some history about the Mexican revolution and of leftist philosophy, as well as first aid classes.⁴²⁹ Thus, they became promoters.

The Zapatista project was (and is) one of autonomy, meaning they would be trying to create all necessary function as a parallel to those of the government. This would also mean that the children in the Zapatista communities would not receive education through the (in rural Chiapas very poor) public school system, but from the educational promoter.⁴³⁰ Another new institution in ejido Tabasco that came with EZLN was the political workshop, where, in the assembly, the situation of the indigenous population and of poverty in Mexico in general were discussed, as well as human rights⁴³¹ and the role of

⁴²⁵ Field observation in ejido Tabasco, May 2007

⁴²⁶ Muñoz Ramírez 2003

⁴²⁷ Unlike the communities that joined in the mid-1980s, who's impact is claimed to have been big. As we briefly have mentioned, the Zapatista core region is the Lacandon jungle. The mutual influence between guerrilla leaders and indigenous thus took place in this region. (Garcia de Leon 2002)

⁴²⁸ Estrada Saavedra 2006 b

⁴²⁹ Interview with informant 16, and Estrada Saavedra 2005

⁴³⁰ Gutiérrez Narváez 2005

⁴³¹ This was something new to ejido Tabasco. "It was before we had human rights", Caralampio Cruz Cruz said in an interview. (Interview with informant 2)

the women, who also got their own collectives.⁴³² Also, the Tabasqueños started working the land collectively, to be able to maintain the people going off to the Zapatista camps to train with other EZLN members as well as maintaining the Zapatista army.

Before we move on to describe other functions imposed by Zapatismo, I would like to return briefly to the fact that EZLN did not live off thievery and drugs to maintain an army and buy weapons. This meant that the indigenous communities would have to pay for the project. For instance, the EZLN leadership would sell weapons to the *milicianos* – the soldiers, often with a surplus. Seeing as the money to buy the weapons also came from the indigenous population, this may be considered double taxation.⁴³³ One of my informants says this of how he got hold of his weapon when he became a *miliciano* in 1993 at the age of 18: “I and everyone else had to buy the weapons ourselves, with our own money. I bought mine from someone I know that sells weapons, not far from here.”⁴³⁴

Collective farming and the maintaining of the armed Zapatistas was to become a heavy burden in ejido Tabasco. The women complain they had to get up at five in the morning to make corn *tortillas* – the Mexican flat bread, and never could rest.⁴³⁵ And working communal land was not appreciated by everyone, for different reasons.⁴³⁶

Not only farming was done collectively, the same was the case in the creation of the little *tienda* – the ejido store.⁴³⁷ Another new institution that came with Zapatismo was the different political committees, where one or more chosen *ejiditarios* would participate in regional work with other Zapatista community.

Training with the Zapatistas

EZLN were looking for young recruits who knew that they would have to wait for years – if at all – to reach some kind of important position in the community.⁴³⁸ As a Zapatista

⁴³² The women would, for instance, make a small communal garden to cultivate vegetables and herbs, and an oven in which to bake bread. They would also go learn how to use nature medicine, using locally grown weed against not very grave injuries. (Estrada Saavedra 2006 b, and field observations in ejido Tabasco, May & June 2007)

⁴³³ At the time ejido Tabasco joined EZLN, the indigenous members, through the processes described here, maintained also the urban sections of the FLN / EZLN with their small surplus. There is, however, nothing that suggests that the EZLN leadership did anything else than use the money from the indigenous to strengthen the organization. (Tello Diaz 2005)

⁴³⁴ Interview with informant 17

⁴³⁵ Interview with informant 6

⁴³⁶ Those who still today are most engaged in the Zapatista struggle in ejido Tabasco, though not necessarily as members, blame this on “lazy” *compañeros*, while others conclude that “We did not like collective farming in ejido Tabasco”. I do not wish to name names here

⁴³⁷ These *tiendas* do not give much income, but they serve as a small source to get some emergency money in case of disease. (Estrada Saavedra 2006 b)

⁴³⁸ Tello Diaz 2005. Tello Diaz notes that EZLN always sought to “recruit the younger ones, those who would have to wait for years to win authority in their communities (...) Thus he (Marcos) constructed with

responsible or, even more so, sergeant, such positions of authority would be within reach for the young boys and girls. In many cases, such “short cuts” would lead to a division between younger and older generations within a community. This does not seem to be the case in ejido Tabasco, where the existing catequistas managed to grab on to many of the key Zapatista positions.⁴³⁹ The two functions mentioned above were among these key positions – the responsible and the milicianos where the top Zapatista authorities in every ejido, and coordinated activities such as work, politics and military – and they were the ones communication between the regional Zapatista leadership and the communities.

Nobody in ejido Tabasco reached the grade of *insurgente*, but the community could present some 97 *milicianos*. The insurgentes are the guerrilla soldiers who live and train in the Zapatistas camps in the mountains and the jungle. The milicianos are civil members from communities that are *bases de apoyo* – EZLN’s support base. The milicianos live and work in their community, but they receive enough training to be able to protect their community from outside aggression.⁴⁴⁰ This training would imply having to leave the community once every two weeks or month to train under the command of the Zapatistas. The practicing milicianos would be gone for one week at the time – which of course shows the importance of communal farming.⁴⁴¹

Holding official Zapatista positions also meant having to prepare the community – to call assembly and prepare the discussion – for the visits by the Zapatista central command. According to some informants, subcomandante Pedro, in charge for the Zapatistas in the region of Las Margaritas, would visit the Tabasqueños as many as ten times from the time ejido Tabasco entered EZLN until his death on the first day of 1994. Subcomandante Pedro would lead the discussions about the present situation, about how the Tabasqueños were receiving the information from the central command and, at least according to one source, would prepare the violent actions that were to take place in 1994.⁴⁴²

them, often assisted by the catequistas, a power structure outside of the one of the Catholic Church." (Tello Diaz 2005)

⁴³⁹ Interviews with informants 7 and 13

⁴⁴⁰ Interview with informant 17. The information about the functions of the insurgentes and milicianos is from Estrada Saavdra 2005.

⁴⁴¹ Interviews with informants 3.2 and 17. Whether or not the Tabasqueños participated in this training also before 1994, as part of the preparations for war, is disputed, as we will see.

⁴⁴² Interview with informant 17. This is disputed, as we will see.

Tools or people with real influence?

EZLN never mentioned waging war on the government nor trying to make a revolution in Mexico when approaching ejido Tabasco. According to the Tabasqueños, this decision was made in a step by step process, and the first period of Zapatista membership did not implicate arms training nor storage. According to the first Tabasqueños to get the message, the form of the organization was not yet decided when ejido Tabasco joined, let alone the name. As we have seen, this is not the case – EZLN was planned by urban revolutionaries before establishing in Chiapas. Before we move on, I would like to discuss in passing: What does it mean, then, that the very people who were to become the backbone of the movement did not know – and still today does not know – about this? At least there are two possible takes:

1. The Zapatista central command has seduced its member base into believing that they have some kind of ownership and influence over a project that was already established – thus: That the Tabasqueños are useful tools in their struggle. This is of course the take of the critics of Zapatismo.

2. It can also be argued, as does Subcomandante Marcos and many of the followers of the movement, that the level of indigenous participation really altered the Zapatista project.⁴⁴³ That the uprising took place in Chiapas, and in Chiapas alone with a few exceptions, can thus be viewed as a consequence of the desires of the members more than that of the leadership.

I will come back to this discussion in the conclusion of this thesis.

The path to war

Pope John Paul II visited Mexico in 1993. The bishop of the diocese of San Cristóbal took advantage of the opportunity to write the Pope a letter Samuel Ruiz called *En esta hora de gracia* – In this hour of Grace. This letter is interesting insofar as it shows us the bishop's fear of what he at that time knew was being prepared in his diocese: the armed uprising. This is a cry for help:

[...] it is not surprising that the recent decades of our diocese have been permeated by a high level of conflict [...] What prevents us, for example, from entering into dialogue for fresh initiatives by the ejidos unions [...] Dialogue, which is a condition for fraternal relationships.⁴⁴⁴

⁴⁴³ Le Bot 1997

⁴⁴⁴ Womack, Jr. 2002. *His translation*

The bishop feared the consequences of the waging of war. He also feared the loss of influence on the part of the church. Earlier on the Catholic Church, the social organizations such as La Aric and CIOAC and EZLN had been seen as complimenting each other and the organizations and project had coincided and co-existed in relative harmony and at times cooperated. Now, the Zapatistas became so strong in the early 1990s that they now could manage on their own.⁴⁴⁵ Former activist and anthropologist Carmen Legorreta says she had to go back to Chiapan the countryside in 1992 after some years in the city to try to get the people not to join the Zapatista plans of war. According to Legorreta, her and other norteco activist's work in the region in 1992 and 1993 led to Subcomandante Marcos wanting them dead – casting a death sentence on them.⁴⁴⁶

The Catholic Church also broke relations with EZLN at roughly the same time – when bishop Ruiz realized that the Zapatistas were forming a guerrilla. “First, he fought the Zapatistas over the control in the region. Then, later, he fought to avoid the coming tragedy.”⁴⁴⁷ The joint work of the nortecos and the bishop did weaken EZLN, who lost some power between 1992 and 1994. According to Tello Diaz, this led Marcos to demand that FLN backed his war plans earlier than what the central command wanted – he was afraid of losing even more people. At the time of the rebellion, EZLN had under their command – as soldiers and *bases the apoyo* – some 40 percent of the population in the regions where the guerrilla was present. Most of the base was made up by former (and actual) members of La Aric, but also close to every CIOAC member in Las Margaritas had joined in the same way as ejido Tabasco, as well as some stronghold around Ocosingo and the area around San Cristobal.⁴⁴⁸

Signing NAFTA

There were rumours in Chiapas about an armed rebellion at least from 1992, rumours that also reached the Mexican government.⁴⁴⁹ In may 1993, the Mexican army came across a Zapatista training field in Corralchén on a observation trip in the Lacandon jungle. This led to the first armed conflict between the guerrilla and the army, but the situation never really got much attention. It is natural to speculate, as does for instance Carlos Tello Diaz, that

⁴⁴⁵ The good relationship with La Aric had already soured in 1988, over the votes in the election for governor in Chiapas, where the Zapatistas, as was to become their custom, told their members not to vote. La Aric and the diocese wanted people to vote against the PRI candidate, EZLN told them not to vote. (Legorreta 1998)

⁴⁴⁶ Interview with informant 9

⁴⁴⁷ Tello Diaz 2005, p 217

⁴⁴⁸ Tello Diaz 2005, and de la Grange & Rico 2005

⁴⁴⁹ de la Grange & Rico 2005, and Tello Diaz 2005

the Mexican government did not want attention drawn to insecurity in the country in the final phases of closing the NAFTA deal with the US and Canada. But president Salinas de Gortari did go on a trip to the Lacandon jungle to show government involvement in the region. He was received on September 6, 1993 by the indigenous peoples of the ejido Guadalupe Tepeyac⁴⁵⁰ – one of the strongholds and later showcase communities – of the Zapatistas some four months before the armed uprising against his government.⁴⁵¹

The take-over of Las Margaritas – January 1, 1994

Subcomandante Marcos held a referendum in some carefully chosen Zapatista communities about the waging of war. The answer he received was convincing: The Zapatistas wanted war.⁴⁵² The most important leaders in ejido Tabasco claim that they were never asked, just told about this decision.⁴⁵³ Others claim that they took part in deciding both when and how war should be declared.⁴⁵⁴

Whether the Tabasqueños actually took part in the violent take-over of the municipal capital of Las Margaritas, is even more unclear. My informants differ a lot on this. Some even claim that EZLN and the Zapatista project was introduced in 1994, after the armed rebellion. This is not true, and is probably just an intention of evading possible recuperation from the government for having been part of the Zapatista project even in its clandestine years.⁴⁵⁵ But Tabasqueño participation in the actual fighting, and the preparation for this, is still unclear. Eduardo Lopez Mendez and Augusto Lopez Mendez are reluctant to say much about this part of the ejido history.⁴⁵⁶ “It is not easy to talk about

⁴⁵⁰ Guadalupe Tepeyac is situated at the end of the road from Las Margaritas to the Lacandon jungle that passes by ejido Tabasco. Guadalupe Tepeyac is located some 200 kilometres east of ejido Tabasco.

⁴⁵¹ In Tello Diaz. “You find yourself far away, he said, but not forgotten. We have developed, but we are not done yet. We should not and will not take it easy,” said the president upon landing in his helicopter.

⁴⁵² In Tello Diaz. Tello Diaz claims Marcos chose the communities most loyal to him, a version that is backed by the former subcomandante Daniel who left EZLN in 1993. (de la Grange & Rico 1999)

⁴⁵³ Interviews with informants 2 and 16

⁴⁵⁴ Interviews with informants 3.2 and 17. Most of my sources say no. “We never had a vote over the war in ejido Tabasco, we were just told that EZLN was going to declare war on the government.” (Interview with informant 16). This also seem plausible, seeing as ejido Tabasco entered only in 1990, and thus was not one of the really trusted communities, such as more isolated communities in the Lacandon jungle. Marcos wanted this referendum over the war to prove to his compañeros in the FLN that war was necessary. (Tello Diaz 2005, Legorreta 1998, and de la Grange & Rico 1999 and 2005). It is therefore likely that Marcos chose to let communities where he personally had contacts vote. Ejido Tabasco was formally answering to subcomandante Pedro, as we have seen. On the other hand: one informant told me that ejido Tabasco did vote over whether to go to war or not. “In 1992, we voted in assembly. And we decided that yes, we had to do it.” (Interview with informant 17)

⁴⁵⁵ How do I know this is not true? The source behind this information gave at least three different versions of the story of the encounter between EZLN and ejido Tabasco. All other sources, both informants inside and outside of ejido Tabasco, as well as sources on other communities in the region, makes it plausible to date the full ejidal entry in EZLN to 1990 or 1991. (Interviews with informants 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, and 9, and Estrada Saavedra 2006 b)

⁴⁵⁶ They talk about the security situation and the dangers of government re-involvement in Chiapas.

this. You know, this is... dangerous material”, they say when asked about the storing of weapons in ejido Tabasco. Of the participation in the war actions, they say:

At this point, no, we did not participate. Because of lack of preparation. But later, we had people going up to the mountains to prepare and practice the use of weapons. And then we participated in the big meeting in the headquarters.⁴⁵⁷

This version coincides with what Estrada Saavedra writes about neighbouring ejido Buena Vista Pachan, and it is absolutely possible that they are telling the truth.

But I also have sources claiming that Tabasqueños participated in the attacks on the first day of 1994. I have little to back these claims other than what seems to be the accuracy of the account when comparing it to other sources.⁴⁵⁸

I was there, we took off for Las Margaritas as soon as it got dark. I was bringing the troops, as a driver. No women from ejido Tabasco participated, but I believe that some 97 men were milicianos at the time. And they all took part in the take-over of Las Margaritas.⁴⁵⁹ Those were the orders we received.⁴⁶⁰

War

At the same time as the Zapatistas were preparing to take Las Margaritas under the command of Subcomandante Pedro, other divisions got ready to take the former Chiapan capital of San Cristobal de Las Casas, as well as the towns of Ocosingo, Altamirano and Chanal. Subcomandante Marcos had the overall command.⁴⁶¹

The Zapatistas attacked in the first hours of the new year. They succeeded in taking all of the above mentioned, but met heavy resistance in Ocosingo. In San Cristobal, arguably the most spectacular military goal of the night, the Subcomandante himself was present throughout large portions of the following day, giving interviews and talking to scared and frustrated – and curious – tourists in the main square of the colonial city.⁴⁶² It was here that

⁴⁵⁷ Interview with informant 16. The big meeting they talk about is the organization of the Congreso Nacional Democrática – the National Democratic Congress, organized in Guadalupe Tepeyac in summer of 1994.

⁴⁵⁸ Like Imas 2004, and Tello Diaz 2005. The source I quote on this, was 16 years old in 1994. He claims to have become a miliciano in 1993, at the age of 15. All of this seems plausible. (Interview with informant 17). In theory, only insurgentes would have participated in the offensive military actions of EZLN. But it is proven that many of the soldiers were poorly equipped and ill prepared (Tello Diaz 2005, Legorreta 1998, videos showing wooden sticks where one would suppose that the rifle should be placed on the shoulder (In La Jornada & Canalseisdejulio 2003)). All of this added together makes it possible that this account is true. Countering that position, it would be possible to claim that the informant, as a social leader (he responsible for a CIOAC affiliated organization in ejido Tabasco) and thus travelling the region a lot, may have heard the stories of this day told, and thus is able to recreate it without having ever been present. I choose to believe him, though, without claiming that this is necessarily how it happened down to the least detail.

⁴⁵⁹ That there supposedly were almost 100 men from Tabasco seems unlikely. The total Zapatista army marching on Las Margaritas is believed to have consisted of some 600 men (in Tello Diaz 2005). That number (97 milicianos) seems to be more in accordance with the total number of milicianos in ejido Tabasco.

⁴⁶⁰ Interview with informant 17

⁴⁶¹ Tello Diaz has a good account of this. (Tello Diaz 2005)

⁴⁶² Already on this first day as a world-known revolutionary, Marcos started to build his image of a poetic revolutionary with humour. One of the most famous accounts from San Cristobal of that day has it that Marcos, after getting tired of telling tourists that they were not in danger and that they could go see the tourist

the *Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona* – the Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle – caught the world’s attention:

We are the product of 500 years of struggle (...) But today we say Basta! – Enough!, we are the inheritors of the true creators of our nationality, we, the dispossessed, are millions and we call on our brothers to join our call as the only way to not die of hunger in the face of the insatiable ambition of a more than 70 years old dictatorship lead by a click of traitors who represent the most conservative and patria-selling groups.⁴⁶³

The plan was to take the Mexican government and armed forces by surprise. The Zapatistas succeeded in this. Mexico was preparing for a new life as a first world country, with NAFTA going into function the very morning the Zapatistas attacked.⁴⁶⁴ In Las Margaritas, the municipal president and the city elites were holding a dance in local dance hall. The Zapatistas, masked with ski hoods, went looking for him – they wanted revenge for what they felt had been years of unfair repression.

We were looking for the [municipal] president and his team of pistoleros. We found them in this dance hall, I was still in the car. We dragged the pistoleros out, and many of them were killed, just like that. Not the president, though. We did not want to kill him.⁴⁶⁵

The take-over of Las Margaritas was a success – the local police was taken by surprise and the city was taken. The plan was to reach and take Comitán 18 kilometres south-west. But then subcomandante Pedro was killed by an unidentified individual during a stroll through the park, just before take off to Comitán.⁴⁶⁶ “We heard over the radio that Pedro was killed. So we had to go back, not to Comitán. We were ordered to go all the way to Guadalupe Tepeyac, to the central command.”⁴⁶⁷

Ads Carlos Tello Diaz: “They did not even have time to burn down the municipal palace.”⁴⁶⁸ According to the Zapatistas themselves, they lost three men in Las Margaritas, including subcomandante Pedro. Two milicianos were captured alive by the army – who regained control when the Zapatistas fled the town – a few days after the fight. The two men – Eduardo Gómez Hernández and Jorge Mariano Solís López – were tortured and then killed, according to EZLN. They were found with their tongues and ears cut off.⁴⁶⁹ Nobody from ejido Tabasco lost their lives in the fighting.

sights in short time, said to a European group of tourists: “I am sorry for the inconvenience, but after all; this is a Revolution.” (Tello Diaz 2005)

⁴⁶³ EZLN 2003

⁴⁶⁴ In García de León 2003

⁴⁶⁵ Interview with informant 17

⁴⁶⁶ Tello Diaz 2005

⁴⁶⁷ Interview with informant 17

⁴⁶⁸ In Tello Diaz 2005, p 248

⁴⁶⁹ EZLN 2004

In *Declaracion de la Selva Lacandona*, the Zapatistas tell the world of an ambitious plan – more in accordance with the FLN original game plan than with the impression people, even scholars, have today of the movement that rebelled in 1994: “(We are going to) advance towards the capital of the country, beating the federal Mexican army.”⁴⁷⁰ This did not, as is well known, happen.

Except for the above mentioned take-over of Chiapan cities, the military actions of EZLN and the FLN were not very successful. An attempt of taking the military base Rancho Nuevo on the highway between Comitán and San Cristóbal was futile, and caused many Zapatista casualties. Comitán was never reached. On other fronts, the result was even worse. In the central parts of Mexico, some electric towers of the Comisión Federal de Electricidad did not fall as planned on January 1, but rather one week later. In the north, nothing happened.⁴⁷¹

This does not, however, mean that the Zapatistas achieved little or nothing by rising up against the government. It meant that their fight was to not be a predominantly military one from now on. After less than two weeks of fighting, president Carlos Salinas de Gortari called an end to fighting in Chiapas. At this time, demonstrations in Mexico City were massive – and not in favour of the armed response from the government. The pressure on the president and the whole PRI system was heavy. Civil society had awoken, as we discussed briefly in the opening pages of this chapter. The man who just two weeks earlier had been seen as the saviour of Mexico, saw his presidential power being threatened by the relatively small indigenous uprising in the southernmost outskirts of the country.

Peace talks were initiated. Official sources say that 19 soldiers, 24 policemen and some 150 guerrilleros had died – but these numbers are disputed as too low by most. The number of civilian deaths are unknown.⁴⁷² “We were sent home from the headquarter to our communities to protect them from the army”, says one informant.⁴⁷³ Even though war was to end in a few days, the milicianos would still be needed.

Winning the struggle for lands

Between 1994 and 1997, rural Chiapas saw the amount of land occupations in hitherto unknown quantity. During this three year period, 1714 properties were occupied – and recuperated, in the lingo of the Zapatistas and the indigenous population. But not all of

⁴⁷⁰ EZLN 2003

⁴⁷¹ Tello Diaz 2005

⁴⁷² Op.cit.

⁴⁷³ Interview with informant 17

these occupations were done by Zapatistas. Daniel Villafuerte et al estimate that the Zapatistas occupied some 60.000 hectares, of a state total of some 148.000 in the three year period of 1994-1997.⁴⁷⁴

The Tabasqueños stood for their share of occupations. As we have seen, the attempts of applying for more land through La reforma agraria had been futile since 1968. Thus, the Tabasqueños occupied the same lands they had been thrown out of during the CIOAC occupation (pages 87-88). This time they held on to it. Martin Mendez Lopez, himself one of the people participating in the occupation, gives this account: “The Zapatistas came to the Casa grande to look for the finquero, to throw the finquero out. But he had already left at that time. He never came back.”⁴⁷⁵ Anthropologist Shannan L. Mattiace visited ejido Tabasco two years after the Zapatista uprising, and spoke to two unnamed catequistas in the community about the land takeover. The two men say that

Within a few days of the uprising, we saw that there was a little more respect. Even though the government put some pressure on us, it saw that there was another army here and they [the government] had to be careful. The government saw that it wasn't convenient to run the Indians off the land we had occupied. It was as if the Zapatista force were protecting us. The people here began to feel very strong because another organization – an armed one – existed. And besides that, those who worked with a social organization, like the CIOAC – organizations that weren't official [governmental] but were with the opposition – began to feel strong.⁴⁷⁶

Mattiace claims the Tabasqueños recuperated the land on October 3, 1994. My sources say it happened earlier, but as there are no written sources on this, I will not argue with her. She also includes the interesting information that the Tabasqueños approached landowner Efren Bañuelos Rios, asking him to sell the land. The Bañuelos said no.⁴⁷⁷ The Bañuelo's version of the story of the occupation is a little more dramatic than Martin Mendez Lopez' account above:

According to the Bañuelos version of the story, intruders broke down the doors at La Floresta. The “intruders” were former workers of theirs from the ejido Tabasco, plus others from surrounding communities – three hundred in all. Those who were at the farm (Efren and [his wife] Maria de Socorro were not present) were taken hostage at gunpoint and later released.⁴⁷⁸

Through these occupations, ejido Tabasco more than doubled its territory. It would take more than ten years before they formally were granted the right to the newfound land – in

⁴⁷⁴ Villafuerte et al 1999, p 131. It should be mentioned that many small land owners, even indigenous, lost their land. Both Zapatistas and others could use the rebellion and the land recuperation as an excuse to expand on behalf of neighbours and old enemies.

⁴⁷⁵ Interview with informant 3.2

⁴⁷⁶ Interview with “Jose and Alberto Hernandez”, in Mattiace 2003

⁴⁷⁷ Mattiace 2003, p 52

⁴⁷⁸ Op.cit.

the case of Emiliano Zapata, the remaining Zapatista community that originated in ejido Tabasco, nothing has been resolved to this day.⁴⁷⁹

The price for winning the 70 year long struggle for the land was high. Landowner Efred Bañuelos would not stand by and watch his land be taken from him. He claimed to have lost 3 million pesos when he land was occupied.⁴⁸⁰ He also claimed to have lost 482 heads of cattle, though 42 were later recuperated.⁴⁸¹ Bañuelos left Chiapas, but reported to the police that 94 male members of ejido Tabasco had stolen his land and cattle. According to the Tabasqueños, two of them were taken prisoners because of this report. Because of the work of CIOAC, they were released after only a short time, but the apprehension orders were still active.⁴⁸² Thus, in October 1996, almost three years after the land occupation, one Crecencio Lopez Ruiz was taken by the police and brought to Las Margaritas. The Tabasqueños, at this point used to dealing with NGOs and human right organizations, send a letter to the human rights organizations Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos and the Comisión Internacional de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de las Casas complaining that the police had taken Lopez Ruiz as well as having been asking around for other social leaders, probably in order to take them away as well. The letter is dated October 21, 1996:

We hereby inform you of a problem that took place Sunday October 20 this year, when the police brought Señor Crecencio Lopez Ruiz, from ejido Tabasco, to prison following the orders given by land owner Don Efred Banuelos Rios [...] The man in question did nothing wrong, and he may stand the danger of giving a wrong statement because he does not speak Spanish.⁴⁸³

I have not been granted access by the organizations who received this letter to check their archives for the follow up of this situation. The Tabasqueños say he was released after a short time.⁴⁸⁴ What this incident tells us is interesting. It is an example of what is described as the low intensity war that the government waged on the Zapatistas after the president ceased all major military operations on January 12, 1994. There are numerous accounts of such incidents taking place all over the conflict zone. Even though major military actions were calmed, the amount of military forces in Chiapas from 1994 gives a clear indication

⁴⁷⁹ The Zapatista take pride in not dealing with the government at any level, as we will see. Thus, getting the land annexion formally accepted is not in their interest. As for Medellin del Carmen and Tabasco 2000, they formally have the right to their lands at this point.

⁴⁸⁰ In 1994, 3 pesos would be 1 dollar.

⁴⁸¹ Mattiace 2003

⁴⁸² Interview with informant 2. As mentioned, I have not been given permission by the police in Las Margaritas to check this for my self, but I see little reason to doubt the account.

⁴⁸³ Letter from ejido Tabasco to human rights organization, dated October 21, 1996

⁴⁸⁴ Interview with informant 2. The orders of apprehension still stand, as far as I understand. The Zapatistas and human rights organizations claim that the peace agreements would imply that all denouncements after the armed conflict should be dropped because of the general amnesty that was granted to everyone involved.

of this: some 60.000 soldiers was stationed in Chiapas in the mid-1990s.⁴⁸⁵ As for ejido Tabasco and the other communities in la Cañada de Soledad, this was felt even stronger than in most places. In the nearby old finca El Momon, the army installed one of its outposts.⁴⁸⁶ The effect of this would be dramatic.⁴⁸⁷

Suspending the peace agreement

On a live TV broadcast from the Palacio Nacional on February 9, 1995, newly elected president Ernesto Cedillo told the nation that the leaders of EZLN were to be apprehended. The president named, for all the country to hear, who all the big leaders of EZLN – hiding behind nombres de Guerra and ski hoods – were in real life. Most dramatic was the sequence where Cedillo unmasked Subcomandante Marcos, and told everyone that the real name of this now so famous warrior was Sebastián Rafael Guillen Vicente, a university professor who had been missing since the mid-1980s. War was on again in Chiapas, and the Zapatista leaders had to run. But not for long – even this time Civil Society told the PRI party system that they would not accept the killing of Mexicans. In a demonstration in Mexico City, people wore masks and ski hoods, and the message was: *Todos somos Marcos* – We are all Marcos! The armed action was cancelled after a month. None of the EZLN leaders were captured.⁴⁸⁸

For ejido Tabasco, this meant new strains on life. During this period, the army entered the community on two occasions, looking for identified people who they knew had participated in the Zapatista project. Eduardo Lopez Mendez and Augusto Lopez Mendez were among those who had to run when the army came:

Some 200 elements from the army entered the ejido, they were looking for specific people who they already had identified. In [neighbouring ejido Buena Vista] Pachan, they were able to take with them some people, but not here.⁴⁸⁹

The reason the army got nowhere in ejido Tabasco were the women. They would not let the army get away with two male Tabasqueños they had beaten up and were ready to take

⁴⁸⁵ van der Haar 2005

⁴⁸⁶ Estrada Saavedra 2006 b

⁴⁸⁷ The official strategy of the government was that the army should "reach and maintain peace". According to journalist Carlos Marin the *real goal was to* "destroy EZLN's will to fight". This would be done by isolating the insurgents from the civil population, hoping the latter would help the army. The tactical objective was to "destroy and/or de-organize the political-military structure of EZLN. (Proceso 1998)

⁴⁸⁸ In La Jornada & CanalseisdeJulio 2003. The low intensity war went on, with fatal consequences. One of the most dramatic episodes, and the most tragic, is the one known as the massacre of Acteal. On December 22, 1997, a group of paramilitaries assassinated 45 people, women, children and men, hiding in Acteal, Chenalho, Chiapas. In the words of Gemma van der Haar, this happened "practically under the orders of the police forces". (van der Haar 2005)

⁴⁸⁹ Interview with informant 16

with them. The Tabasqueñas surrounded the soldiers, and kept moving in closer and closer, yelling at the top of their heads. Both times the army entered the ejido, this happened.⁴⁹⁰ The man ran away, and the women ran the army away. But this laid, of course, restraints on the movement of the Tabasqueños. They could not risk being stopped in a road block, and they had to watch out for the army even when working their milpas. Even though peace was declared shortly, army pressure was an ever-present inconvenience in every day life in ejido Tabasco and the whole of Chiapas. Road blocks were found everywhere.⁴⁹¹

Internal division

Even more serious for the welfare in ejido Tabasco than the (mainly low intensity) warfare, is this account by Eduardo Lopez Mendez: “When the army came here, many of the people in Tabasco 2000 – still living here [in the original ejido Tabasco at that point] – told the army who we were and where to find us. It was really ugly.”⁴⁹²

Internal division had become a problem in the community. The same happened in many Zapatista communities. In ejido Tabasco, the division even led to armed fights, though not lives lost. The shooting of firearms mostly happened at night, after hours of drinking.⁴⁹³

Why the divisions appeared is not an easy question to answer. I may suggest that fighting over who would get the best new land acquired after the uprising would be one reason. Another one may be found in the collective joining of the Zapatista project. As we have seen, the assemblies are run by the social leaders. The pressure is heavy on those who oppose the majority. Another reason to this division may have been the army’s presence, and maybe just as important: government pressure – both negative and positive. The government, upon seeing the military option as less fruitful, started investing more money in Chiapas than ever before. They tried to regulate the formally illegal land occupations by buying the land from the finqueros and give it to the indigenous communities that claimed

⁴⁹⁰ ”The army came here, they kept pressuring us. They beat up two compañeros, and would have taken them with them. But the women got them out, they surrounded them and screamed and threatened. This happened twice. In 1995.” (Interview with informant 3.2)

⁴⁹¹ Even in 2007, I was stopped by the police and had to show ID almost every day when travelling on the roads of Chiapas.

⁴⁹² Interview with informant 16

⁴⁹³ Padre Ramon Castillo says of this incident that it seemed like fireworks were thrown from one part of the ejido to another because the bullets flew high in the air. (Interview with informant 7). Eduardo Lopez Mendez and Augusto Mendez Lopez say that they could not follow the same trail twice when leaving the community because they would risk being found and shot by their fellow Tabasqueños. (Interview with informant 16)

the right to the land.⁴⁹⁴ Of equal importance were the investments in infrastructure.

Anthropologist Shannan L. Mattiace notes when visiting ejido Tabasco in 1995:

The only government presence we saw was a primary school where classes were taught sporadically. With the help of the diocese of San Cristobal, the community built and staffed a rudimentary health clinic that serves Tabasco's 450 inhabitants [...] The village lacks a sewage system, and people bathe in a nearby river.⁴⁹⁵

This description is not really different from the one quoted in chapter 4, from 1988. It could have applied to the 1960s as well, except for the clinic.⁴⁹⁶ It is telling, then, that the road from Las Margaritas has been paved only after the Zapatista uprising, and that ejido Tabasco got electricity in the late 1990s.

And then there were the social programs. The Zapatistas are not allowed to receive anything from the government.⁴⁹⁷ Therefore, upon seeing a neighbouring community receive money from the Procampo social aid program, it takes a strong conviction not to cave in. "It is really tough when you cannot receive your Procampo. The people need it", as Caralampio Cruz Cruz says.⁴⁹⁸ The desire to receive government aid, it seems, is partly what happened when the first group of Tabasqueños wanted out of EZLN. "Tabasco 2000 could not cope with the orders. It was like a first step. Some errors were made by some people in the ejido. Like in 1995. They were told to comply or leave. They had to leave."⁴⁹⁹

This quote also says a lot about the EZLN chain of command.⁵⁰⁰ Orders were given, and the community would have to comply. Together with the frustration over not getting the little money they would have receive if ejido Tabasco were not a Zapatista community, the strains of communal farming and of maintaining an army (the Zapatistas never laid down their weapons – not till this day), this worked together to pull the Tabasqueños towards leaving EZLN. Also, the fact that new lands has been won and that people now treated the

⁴⁹⁴ The reform of article 27 in the constitution in 1992 had officially ended repartition of ejido land that was undertaken by the Cardenista reform. To be able to resolve the issues created by the land occupations in 1994, the government had to buy and sell the land.

⁴⁹⁵ Mattiace 2003

⁴⁹⁶ This clinic was a result of the time spent with the Zapatistas, not due some effort by the diocese. It was gone when I was in ejido Tabasco. (Fieldwork in ejido Tabasco, May/June 2006) At the time of Mattiace's visit, ejido Tabasco were still part of EZLN. It does not seem, from her account, that she is aware of this. She introduces the two (not named, thus protecting the identity is not the case here) catequistas she interviews as local leaders of Tierra y Libertad, and ejido Tabasco as member of the same organization, "a member union of the CIOAC-Comitan". (Mattiace 2003)

⁴⁹⁷ There are claims that the government paid for the Congreso Nacional Democrático in Guadalupe Tepeyac in the summer of 1994. I will not dispute that, but this is beside the point in this context. The communities cannot receive governmental aid, and if they wish to do so, they have to leave EZLN. (For the first claim, see Krøvel 2006. For more on the refusal of accepting governmental aid, see Estrada Saavedra 2005)

⁴⁹⁸ Interview with informant 2

⁴⁹⁹ Interview with informant 16

⁵⁰⁰ For a chart of the organization structure of EZLN, see Figure 7.1

indigenous with a newfound respect, and that not very much else seemed to be happening in the political project of EZLN, made the thought of leaving the movement seem attractive. Most arguments for leaving I heard are of economic nature, as well as those of the difficulties of “living in resistance”.⁵⁰¹

But does that explain the internal divisions? To some degree, it does. Frustrations over seeing that others are not so dedicated in a project that is first and foremost a collective one may lead to trouble – for both parties. Being subdued to a political structure that is far away, but, as opposed to the governmental structures, still so very close and always present, may also be part of the explanation.⁵⁰² And in the case of ejido Tabasco and la Cañada de Soledad one should not underestimate the frustrations over communal farming, which never was a traditional feature in this region.⁵⁰³ And then, of course, when one group leaves, the void starts getting bigger. When Tabasco 2000 was created – it is located between the road and the original ejido Tabasco – they joined the governmental PRI party for a while – the traditional enemies of both EZLN and CIOAC.⁵⁰⁴ That new structures were created – and thus the need for social leaders expanded – may also have something to do with the division. It seems to be typical of ex-zapatista communities that many different, competing organizations have emerged – even though all of them belong to the CIOAC organizational umbrella in this region of Chiapas.

All this led to an internal division where families could be on different sides and where your former friends became enemies. Fighting over land between those who left EZLN and those who remained was common.⁵⁰⁵ The situation in Tojolabal Chiapas in the late 1990s is best described by Marco Estrada Saavedra. He talks of the small, internal hells in each community due to division.⁵⁰⁶

Quick change – but not quick enough?

EZLN altered life in the communities in a profound way. New functions were created, young people could reach power without going through the traditional gates, and the women were given rights they had never known before. And this happened fast. Ejido

⁵⁰¹ Interview with informant 2, and field observations in ejido Tabasco, May & June 2007.

⁵⁰² “The Zapatista command is in the Lacandon jungle. That is really far from ejido Tabasco.” (Interview with informant 17)

⁵⁰³ “We decided that communal farming is not for us.” (Interview with informant 2)

⁵⁰⁴ Interview with informant 3.2. Tabasco 2000 is a member of CIOAC today.

⁵⁰⁵ This also happened in ejido Tabasco, but not until some years into the new millennium. “It came to be ugly between those from Tierra y Libertad, or Medellín del Carmen today, and the rest. So the Zapatistas came, armed, and said: You get nothing, it should all go to Emiliano Zapata. In the end, we resolved it. We got to keep 146 hectares, they got more.” (Interview with informant 3.2)

⁵⁰⁶ Estrada Saavedra 2006 b

Tabasco joined EZLN as *base de apoyo* – support base – in 1990. In a few years, the Tabasqueños had to adapt to internal change, to answer to an outside command, they had fought the government, had gotten used to foreigners wanting to talk to them. The Zapatista project had given the Tojolabales a new place in the regional and national context. And all this in less than ten years.

But not even the pace with which change had taken place was enough:

We saw that what we needed the most was land, good schools. The government was listening to us now, and gave us light, better roads... And EZLN receives nothing from the government. The autonomous schools are really bad. It just was not what we needed. They just pick one person to be teacher. It is not good enough.⁵⁰⁷

Artemio Cruz Mendez touches on two important aspects in the quote above: That land was most important, and that the quantity of land needed for the whole community was now acquired. Now governmental aid to be able to work the land was desired. The other aspect is that of the *bantustanification* of the Zapatista project. The autonomous schools were bad, at least in this initial period. They are not recognized by the national government, which means that schooling beyond secondary school is not within the reach of Zapatista children.⁵⁰⁸ Not that anyone from ejido Tabasco had gone beyond that level before, nor was the public school much better – before the Zapatista uprising. After 1994, the Zapatistas had to compete with a government who proved willing to invest. And thus they would loose communities such as ejido Tabasco – in the periphery of the Zapatista heartland, and close enough to the municipal centres so that the governmental influence could easily reach the community. Another example of this: In 1998, ejido Tabasco got electricity.⁵⁰⁹ That same year, coincidentally but tellingly enough, the community left the Zapatista project.

Leaving Zapatismo – and still fighting?

The Tabasqueños actually were thrown out of EZLN. The reasons behind this decision are somewhat covered in personal grudge and bitterness, but this seems to be what happened: One of the social leaders – a catequista and a Tierra y Libertad veteran – made an agreement with the political leftist party PT (the Workers party) that he would get the whole Cañada de Soledad to vote for the party.⁵¹⁰ What he was promised in return, I have not been able to figure out. Upon hearing of this, the Zapatista central command demanded

⁵⁰⁷ Interview with informant 5

⁵⁰⁸ Gutiérrez Narváez 2005

⁵⁰⁹ Interview with informant 5

⁵¹⁰ Most communities vote collectively in Chiapas. Thus all votes in one ejido go to the same political party.

an explanation – the Zapatistas do not vote in national or regional elections. Exactly what happened next is unclear – some claim EZLN accepted that everyone should vote for PT but then had a change of heart over night, others claim they refused all along, but towards the end of the affair, the Tabasqueños were presented with the following: Either you leave your political ambitions and get out of CIOAC and Tierra y Libertad, or we kick you out. This does not seem to have been the intention of the Tabasqueños, as this account from Caralampio Cruz Cruz indicates:

We had to choose between them. We met at la Casa grande, to assembly. We analyzed the situation, and found that the EZLN fight was new to us. Tierra y Libertad was created by us. So we... We wanted to keep on with EZ, but we had to choose. So we had to leave.⁵¹¹

And that was it. In the neighbouring communities, the majority of the ejiditarios had left EZLN prior to 1998, ejido Tabasco was among the last ones in this region to leave. The strains of life in resistance, governmental cooptation, competing social projects, social leaders trying to find a way to get personal benefits, the dogmatic Zapatista leadership refusing any contact with the government – the reasons may be many. But after eight years of Zapatismo, ejido Tabasco decided that enough is enough. They went on to – in their own words – continue the fight through CIOAC.

And it may just be as easy as that. There is little doubt that the Zapatista uprising was the most famous, radical and maybe even infamous single event in Tojolabal Chiapas in the 20th century. Nor does it seem illogical to believe what Tojolabal cultural activist Rosalia Jimenez says:

Because of EZLN we have pride, dignity. Our blood had to be shed so that we could win our pride back, so that the nation would listen to us and the politicians would pay attention to our demands. EZLN meant everything to us, and I am afraid we will lose all this because people forget.⁵¹²

The quote indicates disappointment with those who have left the Zapatista struggle, those who no longer opt for the armed struggle.

But leaving EZLN does not necessarily mean leaving the struggle behind. We have seen in this thesis how the Tabasqueños were struggling for lands and for a place in the Mexican national project – for emancipation. This process started with the Cardenista reforms in the 1930s, reforms that were never brought to their full potential. Thus, something had to fill the void. Through different organizations, mutual struggle and hard work, the Tabasqueños has come a long way in the 70 year period covered in this thesis. Maybe the Tabasqueños

⁵¹¹ Interview with informant 2

⁵¹² Interview with informant 11

no longer needed EZLN to get what they had been fighting for throughout the history of the community. They got their land, better communication, electricity and respect. They became part of the national project of Mexico. EZLN made the wheels move a lot faster than the other projects described in this thesis – but they were trying to move the same wheels as the others. The degree of success can be discussed, but that is not the topic of this thesis. I have tried to show how the Zapatista movement was a continuation of a long process of struggle for land and emancipation. With ejido Tabasco (for the most part) leaving EZLN, the struggle may take on yet another form. As Caralampio Cruz Cruz, social leader and an important actor for change in ejido Tabasco since the 1970s, puts it:

Here we are today. And we have gotten here thanks to the fight of CIOAC and PRD, and the fight of EZLN. Together. And thanks to Union Lucha Campesina, where many ideas were born. Now nobody can fool or cheat us. Cause now we know. And thanks to La Castalia, the classes there. Where we opened our eyes.⁵¹³

⁵¹³ Interview with informant 2

Chapter 8: Conclusion

My thesis, described in chapter 1, was that EZLN must be understood within a context of indigenous struggle for land and emancipation in Mexico. I have claimed that the Zapatista uprising is only one of many events in a historical process of this struggle.

The chronology

To prove this thesis, I have shown how indigenous life in Chiapas was altered by the Cardenista reforms in the 1930s. I claim that this alteration is the first outside actor that changed life in ejido Tabasco. These reforms, discussed in chapter 4, gave the right of property to the indigenous, and attached the former villains of the fincas to the national project of Mexico. This meant a qualitative change from the way of life described in chapter 3 – that of the finca. When “thrown into” the modern world, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas looked for ways to emancipate themselves in the new order. In this struggle, the indigenous found that their needs coincided with those of different representatives of the outside world, of modern, Hispanic Mexico. Knut Kjeldstadli argues that, in this transition from the traditional to the modern – or the known to the unknown – social, collective movements may play important parts. When tradition can no longer explain the very being, it enters into crisis, and social movements and political organisations may fill the void.⁵¹⁴ This tendency was strengthened in indigenous Chiapas when the Cardenista reforms came to a halt in the following decades. The void came to be filled by the Catholic Church and liberation theory as well as of the deepening of the political structures and significance of the ejido, as we have seen in chapter 4 and 5.

The encounter between church – the second outside actor to generate change in ejido Tabasco – and the indigenous was fruitful for both parties. The needs of the ejidal communities fitted with the project taken on by the diocese of San Cristobal. As a newfound belief in their skills and abilities to find and define space within the Chiapan and national context was awoken, the indigenous peoples deepened their social and political project through the cooperation with the norteño activists that came to Chiapas in the 1970s. These activists are the third outsiders to make an impact in indigenous Chiapas and ejido Tabasco. This process, discussed in chapter 6, was a result – and the continuation – of the encounter between church and community described in the previous chapter. We have seen how this indigenous struggle was of a material nature – such as fighting for more land

⁵¹⁴ Kjeldstadli 1995

and better communications – as well as of a cultural one. The indigenous peoples and the outsiders – in this case both church and norteño activists – found some common ground for their projects.⁵¹⁵

The fourth and last project in the historical process discussed in this thesis is EZLN. This movement found in Chiapas radicalized indigenous peoples, who after years of fighting were ready for ever more drastic measures. As in the other processes described in this thesis, this encounter between outsiders and the native peoples coincided with the needs of both subjects. And, also in the other processes described, the latest project was a continuation by the former ones – with the subjects from these still present and active.

This perspective of continuity means that the organizational structure of EZLN was not something radically different or new to the Chiapan communities. This tells us that looking for answers about the Zapatista movement in the movement itself, without taking into consideration the historical circumstances, is problematic. EZLN saw the light of day as one circumstance in a longer series of historical happenings. In the words of Eduardo Lopez Mendez in ejido Tabasco: “When word of this reached the people, who were now used to organization, they liked it very much. They saw it was part of our struggle.”⁵¹⁶

Social movements cast light on Chiapas

But this only explains my thesis halfway. Another important aspect is that of EZLN as a social movement. When I discuss the origin of EZLN in FLN, I do not mean to imply that EZLN can be studied solely as a social movement in its own right within the historical frame I have chosen. This discussion is rather included as a comment on the discussion on literature.⁵¹⁷ I will comment on that later on in this conclusion. I rather want to stress the historical roots of the movement. The Hispanic leadership of EZLN would not have been able to take armed action without the indigenous base. And this base, joining EZLN as active subjects, had been struggling for their rights and desires for more than 50 years before the armed uprising in 1994. Looking at EZLN as a social movement in a historical perspective offers one clear advantage, based on the following chain of argument: Things had not gotten that much – if at all – worse in Chiapas in the 1980s and -90s that this alone

⁵¹⁵ Albeit fighting over who would be in charge of the developments. We saw an example of this when the Catholic Church expelled the norteños in the late 1970s, and in how the indigenous peoples were constantly looking for new ways to gain ground, both literarily and more abstractly speaking.

⁵¹⁶ Interview with informant 16

⁵¹⁷ Nor am I including that section because I believe that the facts mentioned above the origins of EZLN are new. They serve a purpose in explaining why this thesis has become as it is, a result of constant discussion about the existing literature.

can explain the emergence of a radical, armed organization.⁵¹⁸ By looking at the social organization in Chiapas in a longer perspective, the creation of such an organization became easier to understand. My claim was: The process that resulted in EZLN started with the Cardenista reforms. This becomes plausible when introducing Sidney Tarrow's theory of the origin of social movements in situations of what we may call "contained freedom". Tarrow says that the creation of social movements is more likely to happen in a situation between full oppression and outside control, and full opening and access to the political system.⁵¹⁹ The Cardenista reforms ended villainage for the indigenous peoples in Chiapas. But the reforms were never really seen through, and were actually abandoned in the following decades. This left the indigenous peoples with an opening, a space within which they could exist. But they were never really included in the national project, and racism and structures still kept them down. Thus, the Chiapan situation fits Tarrow's theory.⁵²⁰ This is also in accordance with Eric Wolf's claim that peasant rebellion takes place when the peasants no longer rely on the traditional institutions and alternative institutions offer no alternative.⁵²¹

Such an analysis has implications for the framing of the movement we have seen develop and adapt throughout this thesis. Is the Zapatista movement then a peasant movement? I would argue that seeing the indigenous peoples as the agents of change in the historical perspective of this thesis leads to such a conclusion. We have seen how peasant grievances, according to Eric Wolf, often need to be given shape and expression in organization before entering the political stage.⁵²² We also have seen how Wolf claims that the transition to capitalism – modernization, as through the Cardenista reforms – is the most radical phase in peasant evolution in the 20th century.⁵²³ All this fits the historical perspective used here, and strengthens my original thesis. Thus, we have seen the inner logics of a peasant movement evolve into the radical stage of rebellion in this thesis.

This does not mean that other models of emergence of social movements do not apply. Seeing EZLN as the (thus far) last phase in this long term historical struggle for land and emancipation does not exclude trying to explain, still historically and in the context of

⁵¹⁸ At the time of the uprising in 1994, more than 50% of the land in Chiapas was on ejidal or communal hands, some 25% consisted of private property. (Villafuerte et al 1999, p 123). Granted: State repression under the reign of Absalon Castellanos was vile. But I do not see how this alone could explain an armed rebellion.

⁵¹⁹ Tarrow 1998

⁵²⁰ Op.cit.

⁵²¹ Wolf 1969, p xix

⁵²² Op.cit., p xvii

⁵²³ Op.cit., pp 278-285

social movements, how an armed uprising came to happen at the time it occurred. We have seen, in chapter 2, how the degree of opening in the political system; the stability in the power balance of the ruling elites; and the means available to the government and its possibilities to use these may be of importance for analysing the structure of possibilities for the emergence of social movements.⁵²⁴ The structures of official Mexico were falling apart in the 1980s: There was the debt crisis of 1982; the social awakening in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake in Mexico City; the protests against the 1988 election when official party almost lost power over the national government. This breach in the elites – where all of a sudden different parties were fighting over governmental power – was strengthened by the radicalization of parts of the Catholic Church. Liberation theology was not new in the 1980s, as we have seen, but with weaker institutions all around, this division became even more evident.⁵²⁵

And then there was the struggle over hegemony, as defined by Antonio Gramsci and discussed in chapter 2 of this thesis. The last remains of the politics of the Mexican revolution were abandoned with the change of article 27 of the constitution and thus of the redistribution of land through the ejidos. This happened at a time (in 1992) when it seemed the PRI party had overcome much of the resistance, and optimism was the order of the day (see chapter 7). The PRI party still used the image of Emiliano Zapata to legitimize their power as the institutionalized revolution at that time. The president's son was named Emiliano; the government airplane was called Emiliano Zapata; and official speeches were given in front of a mural painting of the revolutionary hero. EZLN took the name back on behalf of the popular struggle against the power.⁵²⁶ When this project was legitimized by the Mexican people – who in support for peace in Chiapas yelled *Zapata vive, la lucha sigue* in the streets of Mexico City - this won the Zapatistas an important fight over symbols. They came to be seen as true heirs of the revolutionary heroes of the early 20th century.⁵²⁷

⁵²⁴ Tarrow, McAdam & Tilly 2001

⁵²⁵ See how this analysis, in the letter from bishop Samuel Ruiz to the Pope upon the latter's 1993 visit to Mexico quoted in chapter 7, is more in accordance with the Zapatista world view than that of the national government: "The crisis of the industrialized countries and the decrease in the price of oil in the first half [...] of the '80s, together with the burden of the external debt, became intolerable for the economic system [...] the government undertook the first structural adjustment measures in a neoliberal framework, with high cost for the more vulnerable classes [...] we are now experiencing what we could call "the second modernization of rural Chiapas" [...] This is also happening in the context of the chronic drop of coffee prices [...] at the same time that the intensity and extension of the agrarian conflicts began to increase [...] The spearhead of this modernizing agrarian movement is the reform of Article 27." (Quoted in Womack, Jr, 2002. *His translation*)

⁵²⁶ Rajchenberg & Heau-Lambert 1998

⁵²⁷ See footnote 158, on the movie *Los últimos Zapatistas - Héroes olvidados*

Also, if claiming that EZLN is the strengthening of the processes discussed in this thesis – the realization of the potential for a real social movement in 20th century Chiapas, we see how EZLN fulfils the criteria for a social movement discussed on page XX of chapter 2: The permanent character; the mass character; the strict internal organizational structures and clearly defined goals; the collective identity and the distancing from broader society at the same time as they want to change society.⁵²⁸

But does not seeing EZLN as the conclusive phase in this long indigenous struggle lead to a conclusion that subcomandante Marcos and the apologists of the Zapatista movement are right when they said that EZLN is really a Chiapan based, indigenous movement?⁵²⁹ This is, as I have showed in chapter 7, not an obvious conclusion in the encounter between EZLN and the indigenous. These were two different projects – one was the indigenous struggle for land and emancipation, the other was the EZLN socialist revolution. But on the other side: There are two active subjects in the interaction between EZLN and the indigenous communities. Who influenced the other most, is an open question. But in the long term perspective, this little discussion of the origins of EZLN may not be of the greatest important. The interesting process here is that of a long lasting, slow and steady formation (seen from within the indigenous communities) and capacitating (seen from the outsider's point of view) of social structures and social movements.

All in all I feel have used theories of social movements to cast some light on EZLN and the historical context in Chiapas. This may not be absolute proof that such theories apply outside the western world, as was discussed in chapter 2. But nor does it weaken such a thesis, at least.

Ejido Tabasco – an ideal type community?

Another important aspect that must be addressed in this conclusion is whether ejido Tabasco really is a relevant community in order to describe the Zapatista movement. That is not an easy question to answer. The historical process discussed in this thesis is much the same all over the state of Chiapas, and the historical actors are the same. But, as mentioned in chapter 4: Where ejido Tabasco was able to exist on the land of their ancestors, others

⁵²⁸ See Kjeldstadli 2002, page 37

⁵²⁹ Once again: The main reason for my including the origins of EZLN is that of the discussion of the literature, of the way many pro-Zapatista scholars choose to look away from these (for some reason) uncomfortable facts. But another reason is also worth underlining: There are some troublesome aspects in the origins of EZLN, and in the way this, for a long time, was kept a secret. There can be little doubt that if the indigenous communities influenced EZLN, the same was true the other way around. This has some implications concerning viewing EZLN as an open, democratic movement.

had to leave the land of the fincas to settle new ejidos in the Lacandon jungle. The process of creating the ejido structures are not unlike, but settling in a brand new context meant that, for those who went to live in the jungle, this process was even more of a break with the past than the situation was in ejido Tabasco. In these newly settled ejidos, there were even some that consisted of different indigenous ethnicities. And, maybe even more important: These settlers were to become the backbone of the Zapatista movement. Also the relative proximity of ejido Tabasco to the local centres of Comitán and Las Margaritas, as opposed to those further into the jungle, is of importance in separating the communities. These factors have some implications for the study of ejido Tabasco as an ideal type community of the processes discussed in this thesis:

1. The level of inter-communal interaction may have been weaker in the region studied here than in the jungle.
2. The break-up from the finca may be too peaceful to actually give an accurate description of the overall situation.
3. The first encounter with the noroteño activists (who also settled in the Lacandon jungle upon arriving) and even more so with EZLN would have been different. And the level of influence on the Zapatista project may have been more important.
4. Even the level of participation, at least in the Zapatista project, may be deeper in the jungle region. The fact that ejido Tabasco abandoned the project in 1998, while many jungle ejidos still are Zapatistas, is proof of that. This may also indicate that the marginalization is of greater importance in the Lacandon jungle. An example: In ejido Tabasco, the Zapatista schooling system never was popular.⁵³⁰ But in other ejidos, in the jungle in particular, the Zapatistas keep creating their own institutions.⁵³¹ Another point here would be that the jungle communities are out of reach of the governmental influence, both when it comes to rewards and punishment (see chapter 7, on governmental aid programs used to “bribe” communities to leave the Zapatista movement).

On the other hand, there are other Chiapan communities who barely, if at all, had anything to do with EZLN. And then there are the Protestant ones, that (to a great extent) refused to participate in the Zapatista struggle at all.

⁵³⁰ Interview with informant 5

⁵³¹ Ejido Tabasco joined the Zapatista project, but less enthusiastically than in other parts. Without trying to prove Mancur Olson right, ejido Tabasco joined EZLN more as free passengers. (Olson 1977). The Tabasqueños saw some opportunities, but contrary to the economic man approach, maybe not the whole picture. Without implying that ejido Tabasco was lured into joining, it may be possible to wonder whether or not the consequences were considered before joining (collective farming and the army presence etc).

In the context of Zapatismo, then, ejido Tabasco may be a little less than the ideal type community. That being said: with the four points mentioned above in mind, it is possible to understand parts of Zapatismo through ejido Tabasco, and even more so in the historical approach I have chosen. As for Chiapas as a whole, I would claim ejido Tabasco is not far from being a rather typical representative of the processes described in this thesis.

And the literature?

I claimed in the discussion about literature in chapter 1 that two main positions can be identified among the scholars writing about Zapatismo:

One holds that the indigenous population had been victims of repression for so long that it was just a matter for EZLN of organizing the necessary revolution that led to the uprising. The other position claims that revolutionaries from the city cynically used the local population as a tool to reach their goal of a socialist revolution. I have included some discussion about the two positions in chapter 7, but without wanting to let it take total control of my approach. The reasoning here is that one should not make the agents of change, or the subjects, victims of the point of view of outside agents, who in this case would be the scholars writing on Zapatismo.

Where would I place myself within the two positions after having worked with this topic of study for some years? I would claim, as I did in chapter 1, that they are both wrong. To understand Zapatismo, I claim, one has to study the historical context, as I have tried to do here. I follow many other scholars in doing so – I do not mean to imply that this master thesis is groundbreaking in its approach. As for the political tendencies also discussed in chapter 1, I would place myself somewhere in between the opponents and the apologists of the Zapatista movement. Personally, I still have a great deal of the original sympathy for EZLN and its projects described in the introduction of this thesis. But my positive view of Zapatismo had to be restored through research and fieldwork after the frustrations in the encounter with the body of literature.

Would I have done it over again?

Except for the focus on the Cardenista reform in chapter five, the chronology of this thesis is a rather traditional one in the academic study of Chiapas. If not for the spatial limitations of a master thesis, I would have included the influence of the Guatemalan civil war in the 1980s in my account. This conflict did affect the Mexican neighbour, and more so the southernmost border state of Chiapas than any other region:

1. The refugees from Guatemala had a lot of contact with the Mexican indigenous peoples, and held talks about their common situation as marginalized in the national project etc.

2. The Guatemalan army even attacked refugees on the Mexican side of the border, accusing them of being guerrillas. This helped tighten the bonds between the refugees and the Mexicans, and it showed the degree of state violence inflicted on indigenous peoples by the ladino elites.⁵³²

3. The end of warfare in Guatemala and the eventual end of the cold war would ease the pressure on the Chiapan border with Guatemala as the southern border of the US led anti-communist block. This made it easier for a clandestine guerrilla movement to prepare for war on the Mexican government in the vast areas of the Lacandon jungle.

I would have liked to look more at this Guatemalan influence on the development in Chiapas. This is, as far as I can see, a field that deserves to be studied by scholars in the future.

With this long historical project and the space limits of a master thesis, I had to drop the discussion of indigenous autonomy and the San Andres agreements about indigenous culture between the government and EZLN in 1996, as well as a lot of other issues not mentioned in this thesis.⁵³³ For my own sake, I would have liked to include the Zapatista arrival in Mexico City in February 2001 after a month's travel through Mexico. The political meeting in the main square of Mexico City and the fact that one of the female leaders of an indigenous movement from the periphery of Chiapas reached the point of speaking to the Mexican parliament is, to me, Zapatismo's finest moment. On the other hand, these processes have been discussed and analysed by many others. And seeing that EZLN is a social movement that still is active, I need to stop somewhere. I chose to draw the line in 1998, when (most of) ejido Tabasco left Zapatismo.

I do not feel this weakens my thesis. I have set out to test that EZLN is the final – as of yet – stage in an indigenous struggle for land and emancipation.

This is as far as I got.

⁵³² Interview with informant 10

⁵³³ The San Andres agreements is a name used to describe the treaty of indigenous cultural right signed by governmental negotiators and EZLN in 1996, planned as the first of four table meetings. The process was stopped with this first agreement, that has never been ratified by the government and has been made a centrepiece claim by the Zapatistas.

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Appendixes

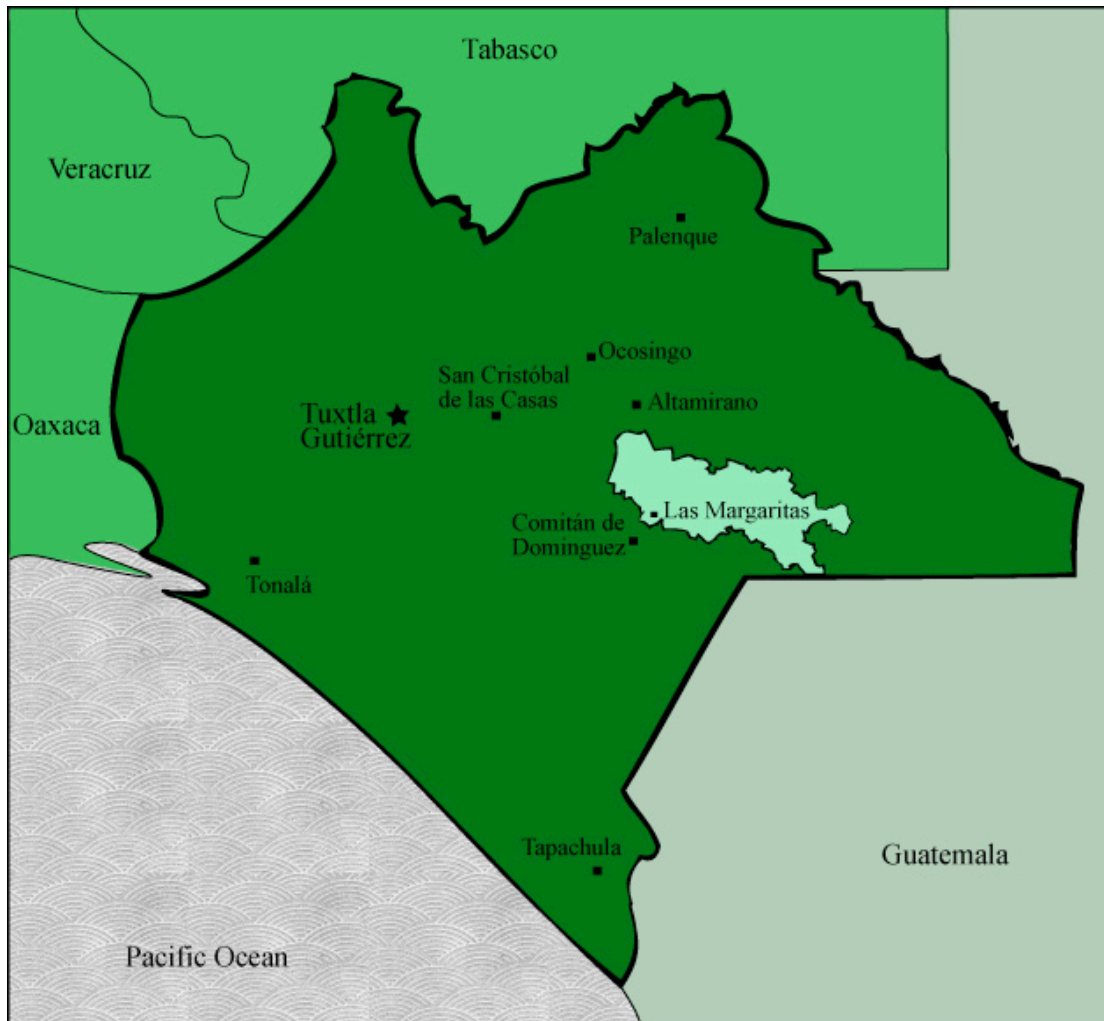
Maps and figures

Map 1.1: Mexico with Chiapas⁵³⁴



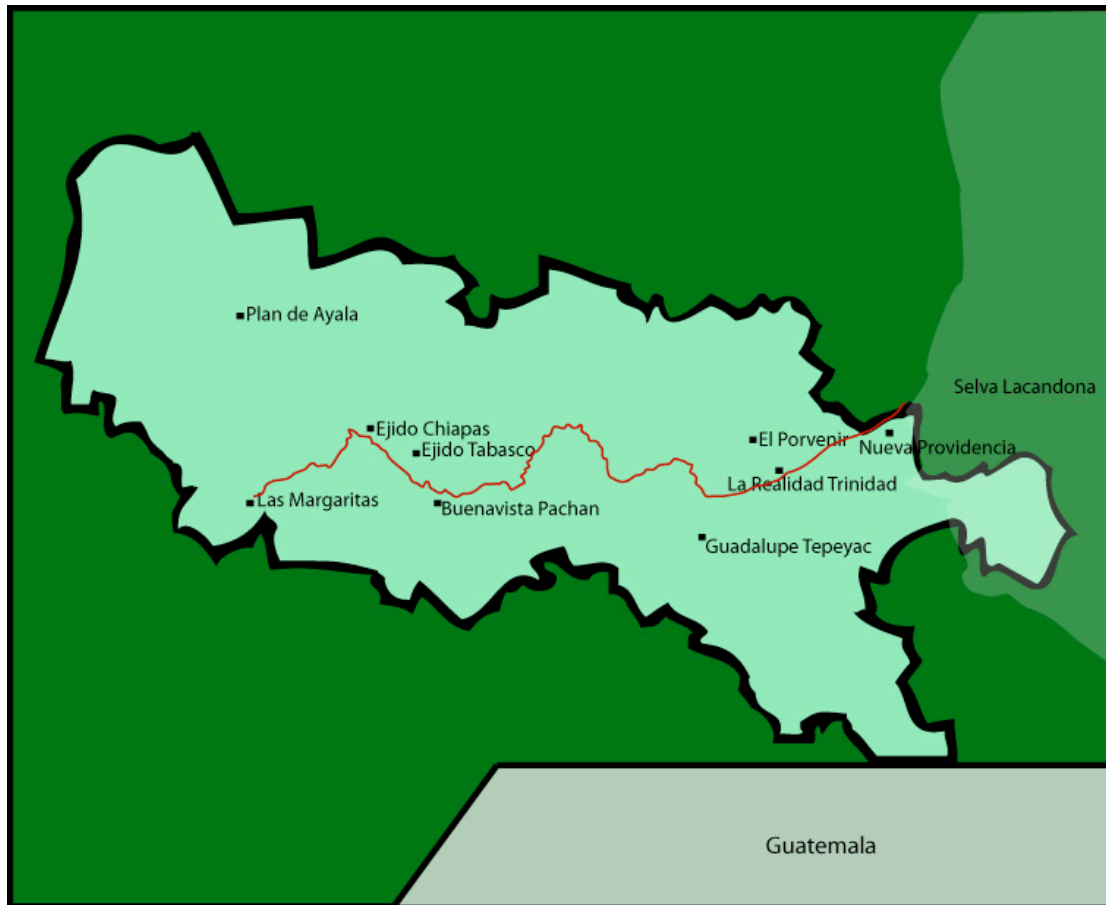
⁵³⁴ Adapted by Jessica Allanda

Map 2.1: Chiapas with major cities and municipio of Las Margaritas⁵³⁵



⁵³⁵ Adapted by Jessica Allande

Map 2.2: Las Margaritas with important communities and the Lacandon jungle⁵³⁶



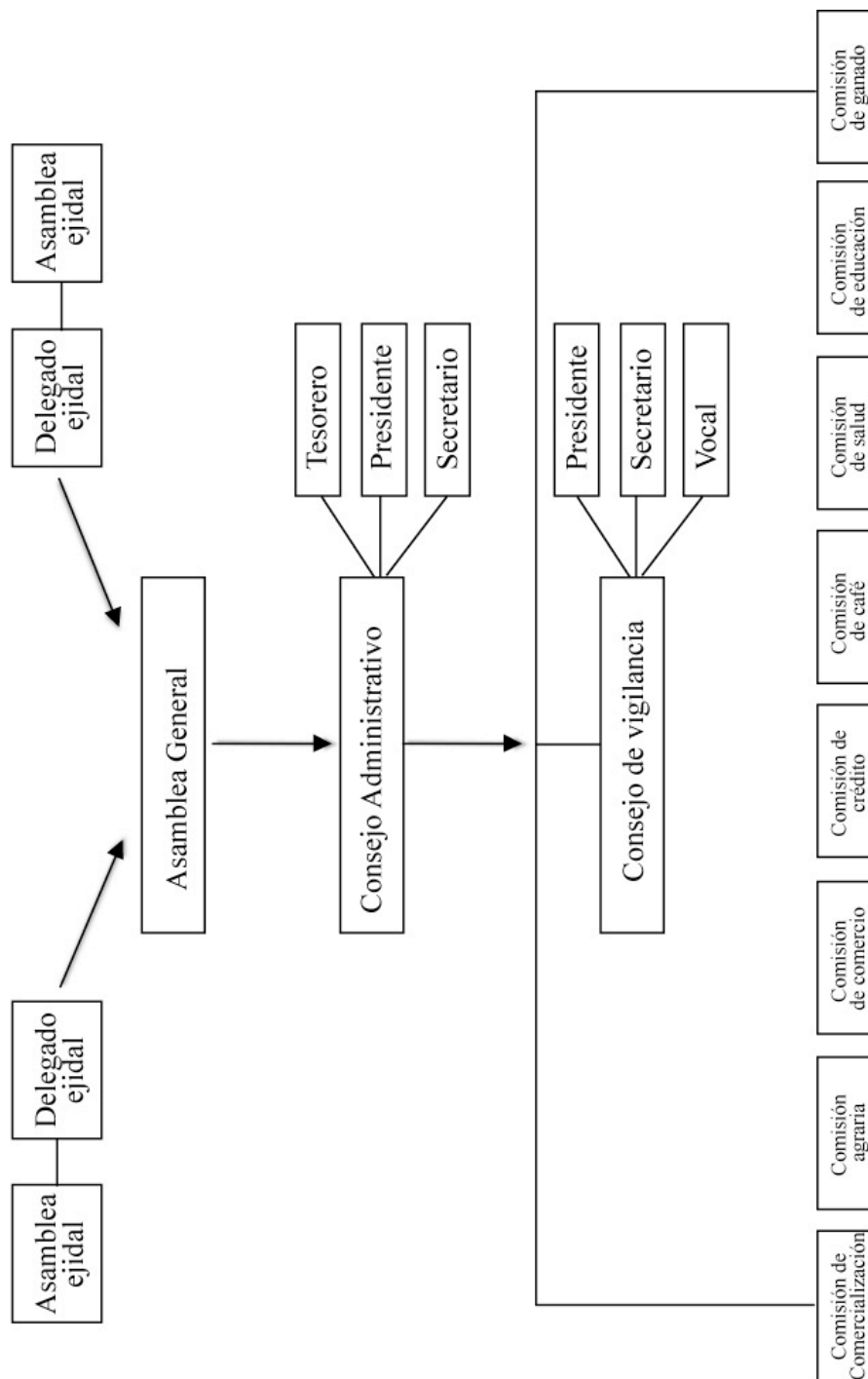
⁵³⁶ Adapted by Jessica Allande. The red line is the Las Margaritas – San Quintin highway.

Figure 3.1: Picture of finca Medellin and view of ejido Tabasco⁵³⁷



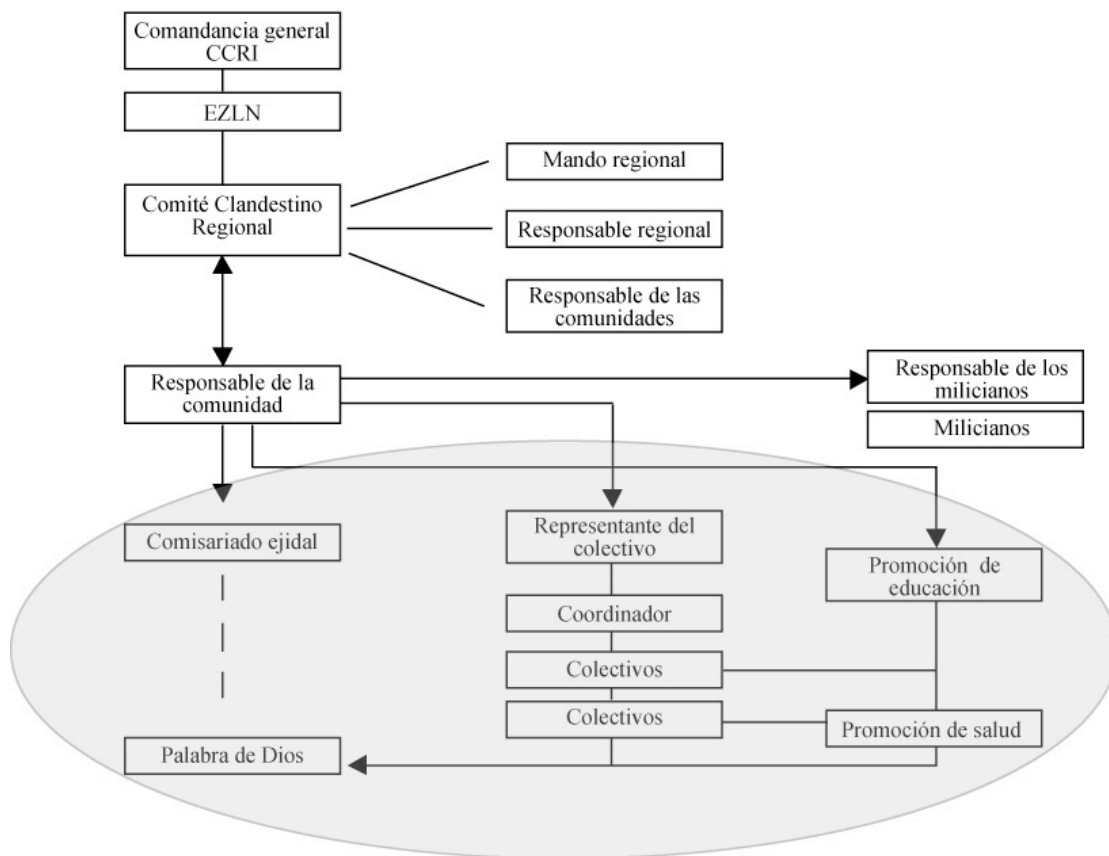
⁵³⁷ The first picture shows the old finca Medellin, the middle one shows Tabasco 2000 in the background. The bottom picture shows the men of Medellin del Carmen during a collective interview in May 2007. All pictures are taken by Jessica Allande.

Figure 6.1: Organization structure of ejido unions⁵³⁸



⁵³⁸ Taken from Estrada Saavedra 2007, p 285. Adapted by Jessica Allande

Figure 7.1: Organization structure of EZLN⁵³⁹



⁵³⁹ Op.cit. p 421