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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

LAS ABEJAS:

CONSTRUCTING SYNCRETIC IDENTITIES OF RESISTANCE
IN THE HIGHLANDS OF CHIAPAS, MEXICO

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

BY

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MAY, 2001

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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DEDICATION

To Zenaida, Geronomo and Efraín
The three children survivals of Acteal.

And to all of them,
children, mothers, and fathers of Acteal.
They will make the dream of justice completed.
Their blood and tears will water out lands,
our days, and our hearts,
so that our rights will be respected
and our dignity be cherished
until justice will shine
and peace will dawn forever.

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ABBREVIATIONS

BRICO	<i>Brigadas de Campamentistas y Observadores</i> (Brigades of Campamentistas and Human Rights Observers)
CCRI-CG	<i>Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena-Comandancia General</i> (Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee-General Command)
CDHFBC	<i>Centro de Derechos Humanos Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas</i> (Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, commonly known as “Fraiba”)
CDHMAP	<i>Centro de Derechos Humanos Miguel Agustín Pro</i> (Human Rights Center Miguel Agustín Pro)
CIACH	<i>Centro de Información y Análisis de Chiapas</i> (Center for Analysis and Information on Chiapas)
CIEPAC	<i>Centro de Investigaciones Económicas y Políticas de Acción Comunitaria</i> (Center of Economic and Political Information and Analysis of Chiapas)
CNDH	<i>Comisión Nacional de Derechos Humanos</i> (National Human Rights Commission)
COCOPA	<i>Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación</i> (Concord and Pacification Commission)
CONAI	<i>Comisión Nacional de Intermediación</i> (National Commission of Intermediation)
CONPAZ	<i>Coordinación de Organismos No Gubernamentales por la Paz</i> (Coordinating Committee for Peace)
ECAP / CPT	<i>Equipo Cristiano de Acción para la Paz</i> (Christian Peacemaker Teams)
EZLN	<i>Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</i> (Zapatista Army of National Liberation)

FCRN	<i>Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional</i> (Party of Cardenista Front of National Reconstruction).
FTAA	Free Trade Area of the Americas
FZLN	<i>Frente Zapatista de Liberación Nacional</i> (Zapatista Front of National Liberation)
INEGI	<i>Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía y Informática</i> (National Institute for Statistic, Geography and Informatics)
INI	<i>Instituto Nacional Indigenista</i> (National Indianist Institute)
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement (TLC: <i>Tratado Libre Comercio</i>)
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organizations
PAN	<i>Partido Acción Nacional</i> (National Action Party)
PGR	<i>Procuraduría General de la República</i> (Attorney General's Office)
PRD	<i>Partido de Revolución Democrática</i> (Party of the Democratic Revolution)
PRI	<i>Partido Revolucionario Institucional</i> (Institutional Revolutionary Party)
PRODESCH	<i>Programa de Desarrollo Socioeconómico de Los Altos de Chiapas</i> (Socioeconomic Development Program for the Highlands of Chiapas)
PRONASOL	<i>Programa Nacional de Solidaridad</i> (National Solidarity Program)
SCLC	San Cristóbal de Las Casas
SEAPI	<i>Secretaría de Atención a Los Pueblos Indios</i> (Secretary for the Attention to the Indigenous People)
SERPAJ	<i>Servicio de Paz y Justicia</i> (Peace and Justice Service)
SIPAZ	<i>Servicio Intencional para la Paz</i> (International Service for Peace)

GLOSSARY

(LAS) ABEJAS: Is the Spanish translation of the Bees, a Christian pacifist movement in the Highlands of Chiapas and subject of this research. Its members identify themselves with the EZLN's demands but do not support armed struggle. The 45 victims of the Acteal massacre were all members of *Las Abejas* (The Bees). They chose the name *Abejas* (bees) because it symbolizes their collective work for the Kingdom of God.

ACTEAL: Small rural village located in the municipality of Chenalhó, in the Los Altos region of Chiapas. Known for the massacre occurred on December 22, 1997 when a PRI affiliated paramilitary group killed 45 indigenous people of *Las Abejas*, mostly women and children. Inhabited by Zapatista, Abejas and PRI people, it is also one of the major refugee camps in the municipality.

BASE DE APOYO: Support base of the EZLN. In 1996, after the signing of the San Andrés Peace Accords, they became autonomous communities with their own jurisdiction.

CABESERA: It refers to the politico-religious and administrative center of the municipality, or county.

CACIQUE: Local rural boss generally associated with the local government and the PRI. The related term "caciquismo" indicates the politico-economic and religious power structure of local rural bosses legitimated by the people.

CAMPAMENTISTA: Spanish term that usually identifies human rights observers who live in one of the designed camps. Their presence in Chiapas is usually administered by the Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas and Enlace Civil.

CARDENISTAS: Indicates active members of the FCRN party, formerly called PST and in a similar political line of the PRI. They are named after Lázaro Cardenas, a Mexican soldier and politician who as president (1934-1940) distributed land to peasants, instituted social reforms, and expropriated foreign-held properties.

CARGO: Civil and religious leadership position in the community. In the Tzotzil culture, a cargo is considered more a communitarian service rather than a personal privilege.

COLETOS: Chiapas aristocrats identified with *Ladinos*, or Spanish descendants, born in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. "*Coletos*", literally braid or pig-tail, refers to the braided hairstyle favored by their Spanish ancestors. Today, they are generally associated with the PRI and

with the government because their wealth and influential power. Religiously, they identify themselves with the conservative side of the Catholic Church and are in strong opposition to the Zapatista people. Another name for “*Coletos*” is “criollo.”

COSTUMBRISTAS: People who exclusively follow traditional Mayan customs. Like other indigenous religious groups, they use elements of Catholicism in a syncretistic manner in their Mayan cosmology. To identify this mixture they are also called *católicos de la costumbre* (traditionalist Catholics). In Chamula, costumbristas oppose the progressive Diocese of San Cristóbal and are, until now, separated from the Roman Catholic Church.

EJIDO: Category of land tenure that grants use-rights to agrarian reform communities in which there are usually individual parcels and common lands.

GUARDIAS BLANCAS: Armed groups traditionally at the service of landlords and in charge of the protection of private ranches. They are now classified by NGOs as one of the active paramilitary groups.

HUIPIL: Traditional Maya women’s dress characteristic of each area. Usually hand made, its colors and embroidered symbols express the cultural identity of the group. The Tzotzil huipil characteristic of the Chenalhó area is made of a white cloth embroidered with red symbols.

INDIGENISMO: Post-revolutionary ideology mediating the state’s relationship with the indigenous people in Mexico. Since the 1920s, the Mexican government policy was to integrate and assimilate the indigenous groups into the mainstream of the nation. Also called “Indianism.”

LATIFUNDO: Large rural estate characterized by extensive (nonintensive) ranching and farming.

MESA DIRECTIVA: Directive Board. The case of *Las Abejas* is usually composed of six members, including the president.

MESTIZOS or LADINOS: Mixed-blood. The term “*Mestizos*” is commonly used in Mexico. “*Ladinos*” is a term more frequently used in Chiapas and Guatemala to identify non-Indians. In Chiapas, the meaning of the word “*Ladino*” is related to cultural identity and economic status more than ethnicity and race.

MILPA: Traditional cornfield characterized by shifting production and diversified cultivation.

POSH: Traditional Mayan liquor made from sugar cane. Its use is condemned by evangelical

(protestant) churches and its abuse forbidden by Zapatista and Abejas communities. In Spanish, 'trago' or 'aguardiente'.

PRIISTAS: Active members or sympathizers with the PRI party.

SAN ANDRÉS ACCORDS: Agreements between the Mexican government and the EZLN signed in February 1996 in San Andrés Larrainzar, a small town in the highlands of Chiapas. The agreements, mainly centered on the recognition of indigenous rights and culture, have not yet been implemented.

SOCIEDAD CIVIL: In Mexico, the Spanish term "sociedad civil" refers broadly to citizen movements and groups organized around specific needs or interests outside governmental structures. *Las Abejas* is called "sociedad civil" identifying the organization as a civil association, and distinguishing it from the EZLN, the armed group of the Zapatistas.

TATIK: Tzotzil-Mayan honorific name for father or grandfather. 'Totik' has the root and identifies the 'sun-god.' Tzotzil Catholics call Bishop Ruiz "Tatik Samuel" to signify their affection for him and appreciation for 'walking' with them.

TZOTZIL: One of the 6 major indigenous groups in Chiapas. They are one of the Mayan people. Tzotzil people have their own language that is also called Tzotzil.

¡YA BASTA!: The EZLN motto that started the rebellion on January 1, 1994. It means "Enough!" The expression implies an end to economic, political and cultural abuses and oppressions suffered by the indigenous populations of Chiapas.

ABSTRACT

This ethnographic work is based on the Zapatista sympathizing indigenous organization called *Las Abejas* (The Bees). Like other indigenous groups in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, *Las Abejas* is a protagonist actor in the nonviolent struggle of resistance and in the search for democracy, land, autonomy and cultural dignity. *Las Abejas* became internationally known when a paramilitary group massacred 45 of its members, mainly women and children, in the mountain hamlet of Acteal, on December 22, 1997. Since then, human rights organizations have recognized and supported the group's use of dialogue and nonviolent methods to resolve conflicts between the indigenous communities and landowners.

This study shows how intensifying local and global networks of communications influence the formation and transformation of collective identity and actions of resistance. By looking at four emerged frameworks, namely culture, religion, politics, and human rights, the author shows how "syncretism" is a useful tool for interpreting the construction of indigenous movement's identity and actions expressed between the local and the global. *Las Abejas'* emerging identity as Tzotzil-Mayan, Catholic-Christian, pro-Zapatista and as a human-indigenous rights movement is influenced by the frequent networks of communication that the movement uses at the local, national and international levels in its effort to resist with nonviolent means. This study explains how the cultural, religious, political, human rights and nonviolent frameworks are combined and reframed in what is called a syncretic identity of resistance.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In November 1999, the indigenous organization called *Las Abejas* (the Bees) organized a celebration of thanksgiving for Bishop Samuel Ruiz in the village of Acteal in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico. On that occasion, Bishop Ruiz spoke about the ‘globalization’ of Acteal and how *Las Abejas* had expanded their worldview as they continued to welcome visitors from all over the world. In his words:

“A few months after the Acteal massacre Antonio, came to me saying how people from all over the world were coming to Acteal. ‘Tatik Samuel,’ he said, ‘People from all five continents of the world come to visit us in Acteal!’ And I thought to myself: Antonio, who always lived in these villages of the highlands, probably does not even know where these continents are. But then he said: ‘There are people coming even from Australia and we received an invitation to go there for a conference on indigenous people of the world.’ I realized my mistake. Acteal is indeed at the center of the world and you [people of Acteal] knew it (Fieldnotes, 8 November 1999).

I personally perceived how *Las Abejas* rapidly grew in their perceived dimension of globalization by observing a world map affixed to the dusty wall of the organization’s office in Acteal. *Las Abejas*’ *Mesa Directiva* (directive board) received this map a few weeks after the Acteal massacre. Since that tragic day on December 27, 1997, frequent international delegations and human rights observers from various countries have come to visit *Las Abejas* in Acteal. In several interviews, the Tzotzil indigenous people of *Las Abejas* told me how that world map was a way to visually locate the national origin of visiting people in relation to Acteal. Visit after visit, it was like opening themselves to the world as they drew more lines linking Acteal to numerous countries and cities all over the world. The *Mesa Directiva* commented how later those lines

became emblematic of *Las Abejas'* many connections with numerous foreign organizations. Acteal soon became a place where international coalitions for solidarity and for the defense of human rights were established and implemented.

The 'globalization' of Acteal and the international networks between *Las Abejas* and numerous NGOs reflects some of the dynamic processes of *Las Abejas'* construction of their collective identity. One can easily agree to the fact that, from a sociological perspective, all identities are constructed. The real question is how identities are formed and under which conditions are they represented and transformed (King 1997).

Syncretic and Other Types of Identity Constructions

Manuel Castells (1997) recognizes how the identity construction process depends on "productive and reproductive institutions, from collective memories and from personal fantasies, from power apparatus and religious revelations" (pp. 6-8). Social processes are clearly involved in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of identities (Berger and Luckmann 1966). In the indigenous cultural context of Las Abejas where the "I" is identified by the "we," individual identities can be re-interpreted as collective identities (Friedman 1994). Therefore, the transformation of Las Abejas identity must be considered in its collective dimension and in relation to social processes characterized by economic, racial, cultural, religious, political and international frameworks. Building on Castells' (1997) reflections on the power of identity in globalizing society and on Schreiter's (1998) discussion of religious identity formation, I recognize four forms of identity construction: *syncretic identity*, *resistance identity*, *project identity* and *legitimizing identity*.

The *Syncretic identity* type formation is also called hybrid identity (Schreiter 1998, 74) in reference to Jan Pieterse's concept of "global hybridities" (Pieterse 1995). This very important

type of identity construction is surprisingly not included in Castells' analysis of identities in the information age (cf. 1997, 6-12). Indeed his omission reflects the newness of this argument in globalization studies and the very little consideration of this important theme on studies of social movements' identity and action (cf. Werbner and Modood 1997). Syncretic identity could be associated with the process called "mestizaje" indicating mixing of 'Indios' and Spanish-European identity. The '*Mestizo*' identity, assumed by the Mexican state as a national identity, is quite an important element in the resistance and transformation of Latino identity among immigrants in the United States (see Wellmeier 1995). Syncretic and hybrid construction of identity has been recognized as becoming a typical strategy for negotiating life and meanings in a globalized society (Garcia Canclini 1995; Pieterse 1995; Axtmann 1997). A syncretic process could be defined as "a result of an erasure of a boundary between two cultural or religious entities and a redrawing of a new boundary" (Schreier 1998, 74). Syncretic identities are considered at times an expression of resistance and survival among poor and oppressed sectors of the population. They can also be formed as an act of choice among wealthy people. The New Age movement, for example, has many expressions in the social construction of identity that resemble a choice for fashioning the self among people with economic security.

Although the definition of syncretic and hybrid identities is quite similar, in the case of *Las Abejas*' formation of identity, syncretism better describes their management of identity around a spiritual-religious worldview. Nevertheless, the syncretic construction exemplified by *Las Abejas* suggests a definition of syncretism beyond religious terms. *Las Abejas*' identity, clearly characterized by their religious worldview and experience is expanded and articulated in intimate connection with political elements. The political, cultural, and nonviolent strategies imported with the presence of international human rights observers, for example, are welcomed

and re-elaborated around *Las Abejas* identity of resistance. Therefore, a syncretic formation of identity, while similar to hybrid identity, is interpreted here not simply as a “fusion of religious forms” (Pieterse 1995, 56) but as a fusion of different frameworks (including cultural, political and human rights) directed toward (nonviolent) resistance.

In the socio-cultural context of the Chiapas Highlands, where the Catholic Church has created conditions for the acceptance and promotion of indigenous cultural / religious elements, there is a particular type of syncretism. Catholic saints and rituals do not simply mask indigenous deities. Pieterse (1995) calls this type of syncretism a ‘mimicry’, as visible in Candomblé, Santería, and Vodūn (p. 56). This type of syncretism and syncretic formation of identities is intended as a *mélange* of forms and beliefs, as well as cultural, political and social elements. This merging of elements transforms both encountering parties and creates a new identity (Ibid; see also Schreiter 1998, 62-83).

My definition of syncretism is therefore not just an indiscriminate amalgam of elements from different backgrounds. Rather, it is a product of a complex process of appropriation, discernment and adaptation through community and intra-organizational dialogues (see Chapter 8). While considering numerous early studies on “syncretism” and “dual cultural” identities, generally more concerned with the impositions derived from colonialism, I extend my reflection on syncretic identity on the contemporary debate around cultural globalization and on the effects offered to indigenous resistance by the intensification of international networks of solidarity. Therefore, my analysis of *Las Abejas* syncretic identity draws also from numerous reflections on resistance identity.

Resistance identity (Castells 1997, 8; Schreiter 1998, 72) is probably one of the most important types of identity formation in the age of globalization. It refers to the formation of

collective forms of resistance against any type of oppression. Castells calls this type of identity construction a “defensive identity” (1997, 7). “Religious fundamentalism, territorial communities, nationalist self-affirmation, or even the pride of self-denigration, invert the terms of oppressive discourse (as in the term “queer culture” in the gay movement) are all expressions of what I name the *exclusion of the excluders by the excluded*” (Castells 1997, 9). Also, in the case of the religious identity of resistance, the concept of power plays a very important role. Cross-cultural encounters intensified with globalization are commonly perceived as intrusive, unequal, and violent. Therefore, this reaction often takes the connotation of resistance expressed as a refusal to participate, or, if participation is forced, of withdrawal as soon as possible. In the case of indigenous people in Latin America, most authors agree that indigenous resistance began with the European domination of territories and resources, including cultural and religious expressions of identity. The struggle continued as new forms of colonial and republican regimes seized lands, exploited resources and legislated against indigenous languages and rituals in an attempt to build new national identities by erasing distinctive indigenous identities (Field 1990, 239).

A more traditional perspective views armed rebellion, cultural revitalization, religious movements, repossession of lands, and other expressions of indigenous resistance identity in Latin America as originating from the characteristics of sociocultural differences already present before European contact (see Rasnake 1988). However, Urban and Sherzer (1991) challenge this static view with a more dynamic perspective on indigenous resistance where its expressions are so strongly molded by the institutions of colonialisms that the precontact sociocultural difference may have very little effect. According to this perspective, the resistance struggle itself has

become the primary characteristic of 'Indian ethnicity (Field 1990, 239-240).¹

New forms of exploitation and domination in today's globalized world have generated a resurgence of resistance among excluded indigenous communities and grassroots organizations in North American and Europe. The 1994 Zapatista armed uprising was internationally recognized as a resurgence of Mayan indigenous identity of resistance now expressed against the Mexican government's neoliberal reforms (Butwell, Ogle and Wright 1998). Neozapatista resistance uses Mayan mythology and traditional language that for the indigenous communities of Chiapas echo much more than opposition to NAFTA and PRI (Nash 1995 and 1997; Stavenhagen 1994; Taylor 1999a; Weller 2000).

It would be inappropriate to interpret the neozapatista movement simply as a 'refusal' of globalization. The Zapatistas' use of modern technologies such as the Internet to create a rally of international support shows how the resistance identity in Chiapas is more complex than a mere 'refusal' (Ronfeldt et al. 1998). A deeper study of Chiapas identities of resistance should deal with common individuals and collective forms of resistance, which may not always result in open oppositions (Scott 1990, 8-9).

To understand resistance identity, in its relation to economic globalization, one must also examine the subset of cultural, religious, political and international aspects active in the transformation of collective identities placed within the midst of cultural politics and social protest (Fox and Starn 1997). The Zapatista rebellion is definitely rooted in 500 years of resistance and

¹ I distinguish 'indian ethnicity' from 'indigenous identity' in the sense that "Indians" did not live in the Americas until the Europeans invented the term and the sociocultural position attached to it. Instead, identity refers to a dynamic process that is characterized more by cultural elements rather than ethnic distinctions (cf.: Blackette Williams. "A Class Act: Anthropology and the Race to Nation across Ethnic Terrain." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 18 (1989): 401-55). Please refer to chapter 4 of this work for more specifications.

the indigenous collective memory contemporary resistance is based on numerous preexisting indigenous movements and organizations. Nevertheless, the numerous indigenous strategies of resistance rooted in the indigenous-Christian spirituality leads us to further investigate this form of identity construction. Clearly, resistance identity, built around experiences of resistance and survival is based on different if not contrasting principles than those of the dominant groups. But the primary goal of this type of identity building is not to change the principle of the people in power as in the case of project identities. Here the main emphasis is in the formation of communities (Etzioni 1993), which become the spaces where the boundaries of resistance are negotiated and redefined.

Being 'community' among the Mayan-Tzotzil people of Las Abejas is an essential characteristic of their identity of resistance. Yet, *Las Abejas* communities are not exclusive. Typically, territorial or cultural communities such as nationalist movements, religious fundamentalist groups and the "queer culture" of the gay movement, build a defensive identity where the excluded exclude the excluders (Castells 1997, 9). Nevertheless the question remains how *Las Abejas* manage to maintain their strong identity as resisters and being able to include religious, cultural and political differences among its members. What are the main frameworks around which *Las Abejas* build their identity as a movement and how do these frameworks combine to form this unique collective identity? As I will demonstrate throughout this work, the construction of resistance identity among *Las Abejas* is better explained in combination with the 'syncretic' and the 'project' types of identity formation.

Project identity (Castells 1997, 8) defines those types of identity construction where social actors, on the basis of available cultural elements, build a new identity that redefines their position in society. By doing so, the engaged individuals and collectivities seek the

transformation of society in their direction. Castells recognizes this type of identity construction in the case of the feminist movement inside religious institutions. Their struggle against patriarchal norms and institutions was confirmed by the increasing acceptance of feminist claims in society and the ongoing transformation of culture accelerated by globalization. In some contexts, feminism has moved out from the trenches of resistance of women's identity and women's rights, to challenge structures of production, sexual reproduction, family and personality on which identities have been historically based (see: Cruz 1998; Castells 1997). Here, collective social actors are interpreted as subjects for social and cultural change through which the individuals reach the holistic meaning of their experience (see Touraine 1981; Melucci 1996a; 1996b). In this case, religious identity is constructed as a project for a different life, perhaps on the basis of an oppressed identity, but expanding toward the transformation of society. In other perspectives, project identity can be constructed by reflection into a vision of final reconciliation of all human beings, brothers or sisters, under the guidance of God's law (being Allah, Jesus, Yahweh, Gaia, etc...). This vision of a "kingdom" or "kin-dom" (Bro Benetz 1999) identifies individuals in their being, beliefs, practices and also political action. Certain religious identities as proposed by Latin American liberation theologies or South African reconstruction theologies (Villa-Vincencio 1992) can be recognized in this type of identity construction. Although not considered in Schreiter's (1998) exploration of the formation of religious identities, this process is particularly significant for both the construction of religious identity and social action. It also leads our discussion of identity construction into the direction of connecting individual identity with collective identity, essential in the exploration of non-Western, non-individualistic cultures (see: Friedman 1994; Friedman and McAdam 1992).

Legitimizing identity (Castells 1997, 8) is a process of identity formation also called

“hierarchical” (Schreiter 1998, 78). Generally introduced by a dominant institution, its purpose is to extend dominion on oppressed and ‘unidentified’ sectors of the population (Wink 1992). This kind of identity construction is central in the discussion of identity and authority (see: Robertson and Holzner 1980). It is also central in the discussion of the politics connected to syncretism / anti-syncretism and to what has been defined as ‘syncretism-from-above’ (Shaw and Steward 1994, 22). In relation to religious cultural and identity, hierarchical authorities or intellectual elites could try manipulating cultural and religious elements of identity toward a convenient theological or ideological assertion (ibid.). Gutiérrez (1999), in her *Nationalist Myths and Ethnic Identities*, observes that the governmental National Institute for Indigenous (INI) has attempted to change indigenous identity to guarantee power to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Following Shaw and Steward (1994), Schreiter (1998) observes how three strategies are used to form this kind of identity. The first is “policy tolerance”, which means permitting a variety of possibilities to flourish within the circumscribed space of the institution (p. 78). This type of identity may lead to a kind of “soft pluralism” and eventually “to a lack of commitment to any specific religious tradition” (ibid). The second strategy is when church and/or state leadership incorporates outside practices and ideas. Finally, new identities can be formed through legislation and official church or political reforms intended to foster new identities (ibid 79). In religious institutions like the Catholic Church, where these types of legislation are possible, the process of religious identification can be accelerated. The Second Vatican Council (Vatican II), as the first global council of the church, made the acceleration of religious identity into culture possible, but not without resistance and opposition. Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia, for example, based on the intuitions of the Vatican II and of the following Latin American bishops conferences, ‘legitimized’ indigenous efforts to place their religious identities in relation to indigenous their

own indigenous culture as well as their economic and political struggle.

Although theoretically we distinguish these four types of identity construction processes, reality is more complex than that. *Las Abejas'* identity construction reflects characteristics associated with all four types of identity formation. Therefore, before any analysis on 'how' *Las Abejas* construct their collective identity, we need to consider 'what' the characteristics and specific frameworks are in connection to *Las Abejas* formation and transformation of their own collective identity.

Religious Collective Identities

A specific religious character shapes *Las Abejas'* collective identity. Although cultural, economic, political and international aspects are also recognizable; the unique combination of Mayan spirituality with Catholic liberation perspectives makes the religious character of *Las Abejas* a master frame around which identity and resistance are constructed. As will transpire throughout this work, *Las Abejas* religious worldview permeates so much of their collective identity and actions of resistance in a distinctive manner of new religious movements (NRMs). My use of the term NRMs refers less to the negative term of "cults" and it refers more to what Beyer (1994) carefully calls "religiously-based social movements" (p. 107). The category of NRMs applied to the case of *Las Abejas* goes beyond Bainbridge's (1997) three dynamics of schism, innovation and transformation. *Las Abejas'* religious character reflects a fourth category that I call "resistance." Liberation Theology movements (Smith 1992) definitely fit into this fourth category. If we focus on the "dynamics of resistance," we see how the study of NRMs has contributed to a better understanding of the function of religion in organizing resistance and mobilizing for social change (see Smith 1996b; Beyer 1994; Casanova 1994).

Particularly, the religious and social characteristics of resistance challenge social theory

in two related concepts. First, this movement's religiously based character questions the validity and formulation of the secularization theory.² Second, their engagements in social actions of resistance challenge the validity of the privatization theory of religion.³ The reality is that religion has not disappeared or simply become invisible in social life by driving it into private spheres of life (see Casanova 1994, 211-34). Religion manifests its persistence through NRMs and religiously inspired actions of resistance. Peter Beyer recognizes the centrality of what he calls "religiously-based social movements" as social systems in building bridges in the existing gap between "privatized function and publicly influential performance" (1994, 97).

Christian Smith (1992; 1996a; 1996b) recognizes the key function that religious identity plays in social movements. However, his theoretical approach seems to indicate a conception of religious identity as a fixed dimension.⁴ He does not articulate how the study of identity formation, in its cultural, religious, political characteristics are transformed, adjusted, extended and mixed according to the situation and the strategies of the individuals / collectivities. Smith considers individual and collective religious identities as a pre-existing dimension that function as a "movement midwife." Collective identities, however, are more than functional (they are not roles). Identities are not just a "spring board" for social action. The observation of new

² The term "secularization" is a controversial concept because of its different uses and meanings in diverse disciplines. Even in the social sciences there are various levels of analysis that change the interpretation and evaluation of its outcomes. Dobbelaere, for example, has insisted on the necessity of distinguishing between the micro / meso and macro level of analysis. See his *Secularization* (London: Sage, 1981). See also Niklas Luhmann, *The Differentiation of Society* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). For a Latin American perspective on secularization see Gino Germani, *The Sociology of Modernization* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1981).

³ The "privatization of religion" relies on the main assumptions that the process of secularization is largely irreversible and that institutional religions were not able to meet the needs the modern quest of salvation and personal meaning that had withdrawn to the private sphere of the self. This thesis is well expressed by Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion* (New York: Mcmillan, 1967).

⁴ Smith has recently recognized this limit in his research. See his introduction in *Latin American Religion in Motion*, edited by Christian Smith and Joshua Prokopy (1999).

movements in Europe and the United States have led recent studies on social movements to conclude that some religious groups are “identity-seeking movements”. This important intuition could be further explored by the study of the new religious movements’ identity in non-Western contexts. Smith’s focus in the study of Latin American Liberation Theology movement is ideological-theological and less grassroots-pastoral. Indigenous communities and organizations in the Highlands of Chiapas prefer talking about “indigenous theology” rather than “liberation theology” to avoid ideological misinterpretations and to focus on their religious-cultural identity (Interview 52).

The centrality and evolution of *Las Abejas*’ religious character is better explain by the relation between the ‘progressive’ and ‘popular (or folk)’ Catholicism’ (see Gill 1999 and Norget 1999). Michael Candelaria (1981) define popular Catholicism in Latin America as “system of values and ideals, and a complex of symbolic practices, discursive and non-discursive, enacted in ritual drama and materialized in visual images, all relating the human being to the sacred. originated and maintained by the poor and the oppressed” (p. 13). Among indigenous people of Chiapas, popular religiosity is clearly shaped in relation (or opposition) to the progressive stands of the Catholic Diocese. In addition, popular Catholicism is also the cumulative effect of many centuries of relations between Maya, Catholic and Christian religious traditions which involved mutual borrowings, adaptations, and syntheses (Norget 1999, 94). Therefore, a syncretic formation of religious identity needs to be considered in relation to both trends of domination and liberation (Steward and Shaw 1994, 19). In other words, the nature of popular religiosity in Chiapas must be carefully analyzed at both level of the progressive and popular Catholicism. The relationship between progressive and popular religion provide an essential stance for the recognition of the religious-cultural character of *Las Abejas* and numerous Latin American social

movements' identities and actions.

Cultural Identity in Movement

Recent reflections on Latin American social movements have pointed out the centrality of culture in the movements' construction of identity and action (Escobar, and Alvarez 1992; Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Warren 1992; Ribeiro 1998; Melucci 1998). Studies on collective identity⁵ point out how culture is essential in understanding local and global dynamics of resistance among indigenous movements in Latin America (Melucci 1996 and 1998; Aronowitz 1992; Calhoun 1991; Hunt, Benford and Snow 1994; Klandermans 1994; Taylor and Whittier 1992). Most Latin American social movements studies have concentrated on political opportunities and collective identities but have placed little attention on the central role that culture plays in "new" and "old" (global and local) social movements in Latin America.

Sonia Alvarez and her collaborators show how popular culture involves a collective and incessant process of producing meanings that shape social experience and configure social relations (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998). In their edited volume entitled *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-Visioning Latin American Social Movements*, they offer a very important contribution in reconceptualizing the role of culture in Latin American movements. In the globalization era, "cultural politics" cannot refer only to those movements that are more clearly cultural. The so-called "new" social movements such as indigenous, ethnic, ecological,

⁵ I am using collective identity to mean simply the "shared definition of a group that derives from members' common interests, experiences, and solidarity" (Taylor 1989: 771). Alberto Melucci has recently expanded on this definition in ways that directly inform this work, emphasizing that collective identity is 'process' rather than product, an "interactive and shared definition" that is "constructed and negotiated through a repeated activation of the relationships that link individuals" (Melucci 1995, 44). For extended discussions of the concept of collective identity, see Friedman and McAdam (1992) and Melucci (1989, 1995).

women's, gay, and human rights movements are favorite candidates for such a term. However, "old" urban, peasant, labor, and neighborhood movements, among others, are not just struggling for needs and resources. Both "new" and "old" movements struggle with economic, political and cultural dimensions of reality. Both their construction of collective identities and political strategies are inevitably bound with culture (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998, 6).

Recent scholarly attention to identity and culture as well as the insistence that power should not be measured solely in terms of the ability to change institutional behavior has provided important antidotes to the structural rigidity that characterized studies published in the 1970s. One example is the edited volume of Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez: *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy* (Escobar and Alvarez 1992). Several contributions in this volume substantiate the notion that cultural identity is at the heart of social action in Latin America. One cannot fully understand Latin American social movements only by looking at their political agenda. As Melucci affirms:

It is impossible in Latin America today, to separate collective action from struggles for citizenship, for civil and democratic guarantees, for the attainment of forms of participation that translate into new rules and new rights. But it would be an error to collapse action into politics, because it is precisely toward the 'desacralization' and limitation of politics that complex systems are moving (Melucci 1998, 426).

My work shows how both collective identity and the political strategies of resistance of *Las Abejas* in Chiapas are permeated by their cultural and religious worldview. It also points out how only through a process of re-valorizing cultural identities can people become protagonists in their own history and actively participate in the promotion of human dignity.

Resistance to Neoliberalism in Mexico

Las Abejas' collective identity needs to be framed in the current reflections on the

resistance to neoliberalism⁶ in Mexico. Ongoing neoliberal economic projects throughout Latin America have affected cultural identities and political actions of social movements in recent years. Numerous contributions suggest how neoliberalism has intensified a worldwide economic inequality (Beck 1999; Bradshaw 1996; Braun 1997; Brecher and Costello 1998; George 1999; Gilpin 2000). Yet, it is unclear how the international spread of neoliberal policies affect the construction of collective identity. Particularly, with frequent international networks of communication facilitated by the use of Internet, new social identities and political “activism at a distance” are emerging around the issue of indigenous culture, environmental protection, and human rights (Jelin 1998).

Mexican sociologist Sergio Zermeño (1997) pays particular attention to the cultural impositions connected to the neoliberal socio-economic and political programs. In his perspective, collective actors of civil society are dismantled, collective identities are annihilated and spaces of communicative interactions are shrinking under the new patterns of integration of Mexico into the global economy. He argues that globalization creates not only atomized individual consumers, but simultaneously undermines cultural traditions and promotes the massification of poverty. In his analysis, several contrasting “Méxicos” are emerging from the economic crisis produced by the global economy. On one extreme is the *México Moderno* [Modern Mexico] identified with the supporters of the North American Free Trade Agreement

⁶ *Neoliberalism* refers to the economic aspect of globalization also called ‘globalized capitalism’ or ‘globalism’. Ulrich Beck (2000) distinguishes the concept of globalism from globalization and from globality. *Globalism* is “the view that the world market eliminates or supplants political action,” which is identified with the ideology of neoliberalism. *Globalization* “denoted the process through which sovereign states are criss-crossed and undermined by transnational actors with varying prospects of power, orientations, identities and networks.” Ecology, culture, economics, politics and civil society are the five important logics of the globalization process. *Globality*, “means that we have been living for a long time in a world society, in the sense that the notion of a closed space has become illusory.” (pp. 9-12).

(NAFTA). On the other (opposite) extreme is the *México en Rebelión* [Rebellious Mexico] identified with the indigenous organizations of Chiapas and their ongoing rebellion and resistance against the dehumanization of neoliberalism (Zermeño 1997, 127).

Although *Las Abejas* resemble Zermeño's second category, their collective identity and action cannot be reduced into resistance to globalization as total withdrawal. Rather, we need to consider globalization effects as a double-edged sword (Díaz 1998). On one side, globalization has a destructive form "reflected in processes of social disarticulation, erosion of traditional forms of collective identities, anomie and declining capacity for collective action from the part of marginalized racial groups and classes of society" (Díaz 1997, 49). On the other side, globalization produces a process of social re-articulation in "the construction of new social actors, in the transformation of their collective identity and in the creation of new strategies of resistance" (ibid). My analysis of *Las Abejas*' identity construction focuses on the consequences and effects offered by the so-called '*mundialización*' or globalization-from-below (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000).

Las Abejas' local / global strategies of resistance reflect globalization trends present not only in economics and politics but also in new and international social movements (see Della Porta, Kriesi and Rucht 1998; and Sklair 1995 and 1998). "The global institutionalization of the life-world and the localization of the globality" (Robertson 1992, 52-3), as intimated in the Japanese notion of *dochaku*, or glocalism, are observable in the *Las Abejas*' construction of their nonviolent resistance (Chapter 8). The twofold process of the particularization of the universal and the universalization of the particular reflects a process of searching for the meaning of the world as a whole on the one hand and the spread of the search for identity on the other (Friedman 1994, 54-58). Similarly to the larger neozapatista movement, *Las Abejas* does not resist

neoliberalism by refusing globalization and proposing localism. Rather, their collective resistance is constructed around the dialogical global/local (glocal) redefinition of identities, meanings and actions (Castells 1997, ch.1; Melucci 1996, 68).

Organization of Chapters

In the following chapters, I introduce the main frameworks and experiences that characterize the construction of *Las Abejas*' collective identity of resistance. Chapter 2 illustrates the methodology used in the data collection for this research. Particularly, after describing the author's standpoint, the chapter depicts the collaborative and frame-analysis approach of this research. From my ethnographic work, economy and ethnicity did not transpired being central frameworks as culture, religion, politics and human rights. However, economy (class) and ethnicity (race) has been present in their discourses on land and dignity. Chapter 3 explores in details the struggle for land and dignity in Chiapas. I introduce the reader to the socio-economics and ethnic composition of Chiapas, the Highlands, and the Chenalhó municipality. The issue of land in Chiapas is no longer a local problem. Rather, it is directly linked to global interests of neoliberalism, NAFTA, and the consequent elimination of communal *ejido* lands. Looking at land struggle shows how new inequalities are formed in the name of globalization of the economy. The peasant indigenous people of Chiapas are exploited twice, first for their land and then because they are 'Indios.' Selling their land is as incomprehensible as selling their mother, and this directly influences their existence as well as their dignity as human beings. Chapter 4 introduces the organization *Las Abejas* from its emergence in 1992 to the recent evolution of its structure. It also presents the violent path that lead to the Acteal massacre on December 22, 1997. Chapter 5 continues the reflection on the Acteal massacre analyzing the various interpretations and meanings attributed to it. At this point in time, this tragic episode remains at the core of *Las*

Abejas' identity. The described multiplicity of juxtaposed, contrasted and mixed interpretations introduces the syncretic character of *Las Abejas'* collective identity. With Chapter 6 our analysis begins to focus on the four essential frameworks constituting *Las Abejas'* collective identity. This chapter introduces the cultural and religious frameworks. A particular emphasis is given to the religious roots of the movement, mainly in relation to the Catholic Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Chapter 7 introduces the political and human rights frameworks. The relation of *Las Abejas* with the EZLN as a civil society is considered along with the *Las Abejas'* development of local, regional and international networks for human rights. Chapter 8 explores *Las Abejas'* construction of nonviolent actions of resistance. They consider their contemporary struggle as rooted in more than 500 years of indigenous resistance. Political and religious elements are recognizable in the nonviolent actions and consciousness of the organization. External elements imported by international observers for human rights are integrated and transformed by *Las Abejas* for the intensification of international networks of communication and solidarity. The cultural, religious, political and human rights elements of *Las Abejas* identity can be recognized in their nonviolent resistance. Finally, chapter 9 introduces *Las Abejas'* syncretic process in the construction of their identity. The argument of this final chapter is that 'syncretism' is a fundamental dynamic for identity construction in today's globalization trends. Bringing together *Las Abejas'* cultural, religious, political, and international frameworks around the central framework of nonviolent resistance, I explain the formation of what I call a syncretic identity of resistance.

CHAPTER 2:
METHOD AND CHALLENGES

A 'Syncretic' Standpoint

Throughout my fieldwork in the Highlands of Chiapas, Mexico, I received much encouragement for this work from the people of *Las Abejas* (The Bees). They perceived both my research and the upcoming writing as “an important contribution for the organization that will help the world to hear [*Las Abejas*] voices of resistance and [their] claims for justice” (Interview 27). However, this work does not pretend to speak ‘for’ *Las Abejas*. Neither does it pretend to offer a comprehensive description of the organization or of the Chiapas indigenous resistance movement. What this work offers is a recollection of the precious times, experiences of resistance and emotions shared with *Las Abejas* during my fieldwork in Chiapas. The purpose of this work is also to offer analytical tools for better understanding the sociological complexity involved in *Las Abejas*’ construction of identity and action. Experience and theory need each other. To maintain this balance and avoid the temptation of blurring the experience with theory, I have purposely kept the quoted interviews and communiqués as close as possible to the original language. Nevertheless, I am also conscious that translation is always interpretation and that both experiences and theories exposed along this text are filtered by my own personal experience, sensitivity, and background. In a word, the accuracy of my analysis of *Las Abejas*’ collective identity depends also on the awareness of my personal identity. Clearly, no experience or theory would be a true reflection without a description of the observer’s standpoint. Therefore, prior to explaining *Las Abejas*’ experiences in constructing their collective identity, it is necessary for me

to clarify my own personal standpoint and identity.

During the entire time of my research in Chiapas, which began in September 1997, it was clear how my own perspective as a young, educated Italian male was filtering my own perception of reality. Since my first immersion trip in Chiapas I was aware of being an outsider among the indigenous populations. However, I also became aware how other characteristics of my identity were even more significant in my cross-cultural relations with the Tzotzil people.

First of all, my own personal experience of working and living among indigenous populations in Africa, Latin America and North America for the past fifteen years have made me particularly sensitive to cultural differences and intercultural dialogue. Particularly, the traditional Lakota families in the Pine Ridge Reservation, South Dakota, have helped me become more aware of an indigenous population's struggle to preserve their culture and dignity. Second, my own theological and personal knowledge of the missionary work of the Catholic Church, particularly of Latin American liberation theology, facilitated my understanding of *Las Abejas* in relation to the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas (SCLC). Above all, my own work with Base Christian Communities (CEBs) in the Northeast of Brazil has shaped my own religious identity and Church vision. Third, I have worked extensively in Mozambique and Brazil with peasant and indigenous landless people. Prior to meeting the landless people in Chiapas, my collaboration with the Movimento do Sem Terra (Landless Movement or MST) in the Northeast of Brazil made me aware of the peasants' vital connection to their land. In the North of Mozambique, I collaborated with the Socio-Pastoral Center of the Nampula Diocese in a project for legalizing traditional ways of land demarcation in order to prevent foreign investors from expropriating indigenous people's land. Among the Abejas of the Highlands, I faced similar realities of inequality and marginalization in connection with their land, culture and identity.

Supported by the collaboration with the Diocese, local and international NGOs, I soon established trusting relations with *Las Abejas* based on the common interest of nonviolent resistance, religious beliefs and openness to diversity.

My own international experiences were significant for the comprehension of *Las Abejas*' dynamics of identity. This confirms Dorothy Smith's argument about the connection between research, standpoint and experience (Smith D. 1990,152). During my fieldwork among *Las Abejas* I found my own experiences and preparation in cross-cultural encounters extremely valuable, particularly in the observation of the dynamics between indigenous Abejas and international organizations. Experiencing and welcoming diversity creates new cross-cultural and 'syncretic' standpoints that are essential for interpreting our globalizing society. The point here is not just that strangers interpret society from a standpoint of strangeness and indigenous from a standpoint of indigenous. Rather, it is the experience of going across localities and identities that generate new standpoints. In the past, and even more in the present, *Las Abejas* are one of the best explanations of how this 'crossing' standpoint facilitates social change and resistance by connecting the local and the global. My own personal 'syncretic' experience and standpoint has been crucial in the investigation and consideration of *Las Abejas*' identity.

An ethnographic analysis that truly describes and properly interprets reality needs a certain degree of objectivity. I tried to respect what really emerged from this analysis. This is one of the reasons that only the cultural, religious, political and human rights-international aspects are considered as principal frameworks for the trans-formation of *Las Abejas* identity. I purposely avoided applying to this analysis other to me obvious social categories such as economy, class, ethnicity, and gender. Nevertheless, the analysis present these and other social categories but incorporated or at the roots of my four main frameworks. The role and struggle of *Las Abejas*

women, for example, emerged clearer in relation with the Acteal massacre, the nonviolent resistance, and in relation with international presence. The Highlands and Chenalhó represent a complex socio-economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, political and international context that challenges the researcher to listen and observe all sides. *Las Abejas* are immersed in this complex situation. It was my concern to capture different views and perspectives among *Las Abejas*, their neighbors, and collaborators. During my fieldwork, I integrated interviews with *Las Abejas* Catholics, which are the majority, with Presbyterians Abejas, Priistas, and Zapatistas. Dialogue was a necessary step to prepare my interviews with diffident Priistas and suspicious Zapatistas in the municipality of Chenalhó. The International Service for Peace (SIPAZ) later built upon these established dialogical relationships to implement their work for the promotion of interreligious dialogue in the Highlands.

My attempts in establishing dialogue with the different parts of the conflict also benefited *Las Abejas'* effort to construct dialogue in the municipality of Chenalhó. Engaging in an open dialogue does not mean being neutral. Like other friends of Christian Peacemakers Teams (CPT), I remained open to dialogue while clear in my support for nonviolent initiatives of resistance. June Nash (1979), reflecting on her fieldwork among the persecuted Mayan people of Guatemala and on the accusation that she was a CIA agent, became convinced that "we can no longer retreat into the deceptive pose of neutrality" (p. 368). She understood the fear of her informants keeping in mind her identity as an educated and financially secure US citizen. She clearly was a reflection of the power exerted in the colonial relationship between the United States and Central America. From this realization, June Nash took the position that it was necessary for social scientists to actively oppose US government policy toward Third World countries. I agree with June Nash that researchers need to go beyond neutrality. Yet, the complexity of the Highlands of Chiapas

deserves a broader vision beyond certain political and cultural categorizations of an indigenous community in resistance.

Doing Fieldwork in Dangerous Places

Doing fieldwork in violent or potentially violent contexts is no longer restricted to countries in conflict. Urban research on gang activities, drug use and prostitution can be dangerous contexts where doing fieldwork can be a risky experience for both researchers and subjects being researched. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the peculiar difficulties and vulnerabilities involved doing research in war zones or in places of “low-intensity warfare.” Actually, for the people who live in these areas, the intensity of the conflict, the stress, and fear are anything but ‘low.’ In *Dangerous Fieldwork*, Raymond Lee observes how research carried out in counterinsurgency areas is extremely delicate (Lee 1995, 35). Modern counterinsurgency techniques rely on general surveillance, such as detailed tracking of people’s movement and activities. Detailed information on people and organizations typically gathered during fieldwork could be extremely compromising for the group in resistance if this information falls into the wrong hands. That is why researchers need to be extremely cautious by using codes, false names and continuously keeping the information in hidden and safe places. In Chiapas, a researcher must be very cautious about sharing his/her research. Even though “the researcher is not likely to be close to conspiratorial activities (Lee 1995, 36), in the context of Chiapas, anyone who does not behave as a ‘tourist’ is automatically classified as a Zapatista supporter, and therefore a “dangerous agitator of people” (La Jornada [Mexico City], 16 March 1998). As Bishop Ruiz observed, “To be a tourist, for the Mexican government, one needs to be blind and deaf, because it is impossible not seeing what is going on in Chiapas” (Interview 61). However, signs of war and conflict are purposely hidden from San Cristóbal and other tourist places. The Mexican

government strategically places its military and immigration checkpoints along roads near the resisting communities. Tourists rarely venture in this direction and hardly ever see checkpoints or military bases.

Doing research among Chiapas' resisting communities identified with the Zapatista movement is often a difficult task. The Mexican government does not distinguish foreign researchers from foreign human rights observers who, because of their presence among resisting communities, are automatically labeled as 'political agitators'. Since the 1994 Zapatista uprising, the Mexican government has expelled more than 144 foreign people from Chiapas who were considered to be doing activities not pertinent to their tourist immigrant status.

During my fieldwork I had to pass through numerous military and migration checkpoints to reach *Las Abejas* communities in Chenalhó. Although the Instituto Nacional de Migración (INM) was informed of my travels to Chenalhó, military and immigration authorities often questioned my presence and activities in the area.

To avoid compromising names of people and localities in this work, I have changed or omitted names. With the exception of public names, I did not specify the names of my or the people I interviewed. The organizations mentioned in this research, except for those publicly known as the human rights center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (CDHFBC), are purposely cited in general informants definitions such "local NGO" or "international NGO." *Las Abejas* and other organizations actively working in the context of insurgency and counterinsurgency of Chiapas recognize a certain degree of risk involved in a work like mine. Nevertheless, they know that spreading their message and making the world aware of their identity and experiences of resistance is more important than the risk. As one of them told me: "If we remain silent, it is like being condemned to death... thanks for working in this direction" (Interview 30).

In spite of the difficulties associated with this research, I was able to complete 100 interviews between July 1998 and February 2000. In addition to my full time fieldwork in Chiapas, which was between May and December 1999, I completed three other trips to Chiapas and Mexico City where I had the possibility to create contacts and perform important interviews to church-based organizations and Mexican and international non-governmental organizations. In 1998, in the midst of the Mexican government's xenophobic campaign, it was quite difficult to enter and doing investigation among 'forbidden' organizations. The entrance to the human rights center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the diocesan curia, and other 'Zapatista' sympathizing organizations were constantly watched over by government related agents. In 1999, the presence of the Mexican Army on the roads to the *Las Abejas* communities in Chenalhó continue to be heavy and discouraging to foreigners. Nevertheless, I was able to perform weekly trips to the refugee camps of Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen. There I conducted numerous interviews with *Las Abejas*' catechists, founders, displaced people, women, children, campamentistas (human rights observers) and members of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT). In about 15 occasions I engaged *Las Abejas* in a particular form of group-conversation similar to focus groups. Although I proposed questions, they were discussing as community, and sharing with me the conclusions of their reflections through a selected spokesperson. In this way, eventual problems emerging with translation were reduced by community consensus and collective interpretations. This method allowed me to get the opinion of those people who would not normally engage in a one-to-one interview. I found this method to be particularly useful in establishing communication with Priistas that, because the ongoing investigation on the Acteal massacre, they would be afraid of improper declarations and therefore refuse a personal interview. With *Las Abejas*, I found extremely important to build trusting and friendly relationships through frequent visits and active

participation into the religious and social life of the communities. I eventually came to be called as the *Subcomandante de Sipaz* or the *Hermano* (brother) *del Subcomandante*.

Research as Collaboration and Bridge Building

Upon my return to Chicago in January 2000, I continued researching publications on the topics of this thesis. To my surprise, I found several new articles, based on ethnographic works in Chiapas that were not accessible in any library in Chiapas. Evidently, this is explained by different economic possibilities between academic institutions of the North and the South. But this is not the only reason. In Chiapas I was even more surprised to observe how numerous indigenous organizations did not know about articles written by ethnographers, journalists or activists. What could be the reason that most the writers of these books, articles and other documents based on ethnographic works among the indigenous people of Chiapas often do not share a copy with the people and organizations involved?

I began to realize that even research could become a form of 'academic exploitation'. As commented in my fieldnotes:

Today we spent long time with Pedro. We were surprised that, as a directive member of *Las Abejas*, he didn't know about the books written about their organization. We gave him the books and articles in Spanish and translated for him those in English. He wanted to have more information regarding the authors who write "about them." Evidently there are many people that get information from them but do not share the results with them... We showed the content of the Abejas web page with a few members of the *Mesa Directiva* (Directive Board). They didn't know about the web page... (Fieldnotes, September 15, 1999).

I was happy and shocked at the same time when I saw Rosa receiving a copy of the photo of her pushing away soldiers in Xoyep. That photo has been all over the world and it has been used by so many organizations to publicized so many initiatives for Chiapas... Rosa was definitely happy with that, but I was surprised that among all the journalists, international observers and delegations that came there, no one until now shared a copy of this photo with her... I realized how even

academic research takes without giving back. Even if used with good intentions of informing the world about the struggle of Chiapas, we still could contribute to the exploitation of the indigenous people...(Fieldnotes, December 2, 1999).

The method of bridge building implies facilitating the subjects' access to resources of the researcher. Our *Las Abejas* friends often stopped at our house consulting books on Mexico, Chiapas or the Zapatistas. Some of them even borrowed some publications to prepare their speeches for delegations visiting their communities. I have also facilitated their contact with authors who write about them but do not share the results with them. Some of the texts of web pages in English were translated for them in order to get more informed, as well as to comment and critique them. The sharing of photos, as the above-mentioned example of Rosa illustrates, was also important in the sharing of resources with the whole community.

Drawing upon more than 15 years of grassroots activities in cross-cultural settings, I planned this immersion experience in the Highlands with a method of collaboration. With my expertise in sociology of religion, I collaborated with the International Service for Peace (SIPAZ) in their ongoing projects of assessing the religious presence in the area of Chenalhó. The project was twofold. First, I sought to create a document where different voices and experiences of churches in Chenalhó could be presented internationally. Second, the process in itself was a means to create more dialogue among different churches and political positions by collaborating on the creation of '*folletos populares*' (popular flyers) focusing on interreligious dialogue themes. From my previous trips to Chiapas, I knew two U.S. missionaries from the Presbyterian Church that later turned out to be very important contacts for the realization of this project. This collaboration offered valid resources and guidelines from which both this project and my research benefited. I believe that academia can and must bring grassroots movements important theoretical tools that, if met by the needs and experiences of reality, can benefit society.

Open Fields of Chiapas

Traditionally, cultural anthropologists have tried to study delimited social units. In the context of Mesoamerica, these units have often been “Indian”⁷ villages bearing cultural attributes that resemble their pre-Colombian past in some way. The process of defining the field of study has generated a beneficial debate concerning the cultural and religious “purity” of indigenous identity (see Elsass 1992). Numerous social scientists agree that indigenous societies identify themselves in defined locations and fixed cultural traits, particularly language, worldviews, rituals, organizations and leadership (see: Urban and Sherzer 1991 and Langdon and Baer 1992). This perspective identifies cultural traditions as the essence of Indian identity and the degree to which people change or remain stable over time, determines the chances for assimilation or cultural survival (Elsass 1992, 56). This clearly emerges from the theory of structural-functionalism, “which imagines social relations as homeostatic organisms in which individual and collective behaviors are defined by cultural norms and values in order to maintain social equilibrium” (Les Field 1990).

Indeed this perspective encouraged numerous anthropologists and social scientists to act as advocates for the survival of indigenous cultures. However, most ethnographic studies following this perspective turned into considering indigenous people as objects of research and considered identity as authentically indigenous only when “uncontaminated” by other cultures. James Clifford’s *The Predicament of Culture* (1986) represents one of the strongest critiques of

⁷ Indigenous people and movements in Mexico employ the term ‘indígena’ (indigenous) as self-description, while ‘Indio’ (Indian) still carries a negative and racist connotation. Sometimes, the term Indios is purposely used to challenge hegemonic cultural stereotypes as in the same manner that radicalized communities, intellectuals and specific sociological studies in the United States use words like nigger or queer. Throughout this work I use the term indigenous people as an inoffensive term. When I use the term Indian, it is only to respect original citations or in an ironic or critical sense.

this idea of studying indigenous cultures as “closed communities.” But several other studies strongly questioned the common ethnographic way of “objectifying” the studied indigenous community and a more critical analysis was directed on the “observers” and their relation with the “observed” (see: Fabian 1983 and Stocking 1985).

Social scientists immersed in the day-to-day reality of indigenous life discovered that the “defined fields” were actually “undefined” and in continuous transformation (cf. Collier, 1975). If in the past an isolated indigenous community (or village, group or culture) probably never existed (Gossen 1986), the evident intensification of social networks of today’s globalization trends compel ethnography to go beyond the study of a mythical isolated, exotic and ‘pure’ subject. A village community alone as the frame for our study allows too many important dynamics to go unobserved and unanalyzed. Too often, limiting the physical or intellectual horizon for fieldworkers results in an idealization of the indigenous community’s identity and resistance against the external imposition of the state and what is ‘not-traditional.’ Several ethnographies among indigenous communities in Latin America have privileged detailed accounts of the local communities without considering the historical, political, and global contexts.⁸

Chiapas fields challenge ethnography to go beyond its traditional borders. For the past decade, Chiapas and other Mexican rural landscapes have clearly substantiated how changes in ‘the field’ are the fruit of regional, national and international dynamics. Therefore, efforts to understand the impact of these dynamics must carry out ethnographic research beyond exclusively local fields. The context of Chiapas, in its intensifying struggle and solidarity mirrors today’s globalizing society. Today’s Chiapas fields indicate the coming together of local and

⁸ Meticulous ethnographic works on indigenous villages in Peru, for example, completely omit the nearby revolutionary activities of *Sendero Luminoso* (Shining Path) (See Starn 1991).

global dynamics of oppression and resistance. In a word, fields are 'glocal' (Robertson 1992). Therefore, observing the interactions between multiple levels of "fields" is essential to identifying and understanding the processes and strategies of resistance.

Two main factors push fieldwork among Chiapas indigenous communities beyond traditional fields. First, the greater impoverishment of local communities resulting from corrosive inflation, the withdrawal of subsidies for basic grains, land tenure changes and reduction of state services have all profoundly undermined lives of the peasant-indigenous population and radically transformed or eliminated the traditional bases for productive self-sufficiency. Efforts to understand the impact of these forces in the local community must go beyond the local level of analysis. Second, the increased attention paid by social scientists to ethnicity, gender and social class makes it more difficult to focus exclusively on the opinions and roles of male community leaders. Combined with state and economic violence, this tendency challenges Mesoamerican ethnography to find new approaches to the idea of agency. As formulated by James Scott, even powerless victims of social injustice demonstrate being part of a large 'counterhegemonic movement of resistance' or 'symbolic performance' (Scott 1976 and 1990). In the context of Chiapas, many indigenous organizations and movements indirectly identified with the EZLN are active agents of resistance. Within the *Las Abejas*, more "hidden" subjects such as women and children are active participants in the organization's struggle of resistance.

Most ethnographic analysis of the indigenous people of Chiapas and the Highlands are based on descriptions offered by male informants, usually catechists. Language and cultural obstacles make direct dialogues with indigenous women extremely difficult (see Eber 1999). In my experience, communication with indigenous women, children and men not in leadership is possible when there is a relationship of trust. Among *Las Abejas*, probably like other Chiapas

indigenous communities in resistance, trust and sharing develop when ethnographers live with them and share their struggles and fears. The best conversations I had with Abejas women were probably around the fire (and the smoke) of the refugee camps' common kitchens. As they cooked and served the tortillas and beans, they shared their fears about the paramilitaries, their concerns for their communities, and their dreams for a better Chiapas. Through the method of focus groups I had the possibility to better understand women's opinions and experiences. The mediation of a group was essential for those women, that because of my 'intimidating' presence, their survivor experiences, and timid characters, a personal interview would not be possible.

The voices of numerous men and women of *Las Abejas*, as well as those of pastoral workers and members of national and international NGOs are expressed throughout this work. Their experiences and opinions show the complexity of the struggle of Chiapas but also the great possibilities for change emerging from the numerous local, regional and global networks between indigenous, Mexican and international people. The fields of Chiapas are not isolated but in connection with numerous other struggles and experiences of resistance in the Americas and the world. The following chapter presents the characteristics of the Chiapas struggle around the issues of land and dignity. These two central issues introduce the indigenous worldview of economic and ethnic inequalities in relation to cultural, religious, political and international themes.

CHAPTER 3:
THE STRUGGLE FOR LAND AND DIGNITY IN CHIAPAS

A Double Marginalization: Poor and Indigenous

Most Chiapas indigenous communities have long histories of being victims of a double marginalization. Beginning in the late 1960s, Mayan descendants of the Highlands realized how both their social conditions of poverty and their ethnic identity as indigenous contributed to their marginalization and exclusion (Menocal 1998). During a 1968 meeting of catechists in San Cristóbal de Las Casas, indigenous people began a process of consciousness raising which led the Catholic Church into a long process of accompanying indigenous communities and movements (see Logorreta Díaz 1998). Bishop Samuel Ruiz García recalls how an old Tzotzil-Mayan catechist from the Highlands understood his condition of marginalization:

Manuel Pérez Gomez shared with other catechists how his heart was sad. He said:

I was walking on the road to San Cristóbal when I faced the son of Juan Manuel Gomez. He was riding a horse and stopped me saying: "Hola, poor Indios, where are you going?" I was surprised by his expression and I replied: "Aren't you the son of Juan Manuel?"

"Yes, he said, but I am not Indios anymore... Now I have my horse and my rancho and I am not like you. You are going to be always an 'Indio' if you continue following those priests [...]. When you want to get a job just come to my ranch."

Then, I walked here very sad. It is true that I am poor and I could not go to school. But I know how to read reality..."⁹

Thomas Benjamin (1996) explains Chiapas' contradictory reality of poor people living in

a rich land as a sort of conspiracy against indigenous people. Mayan descendants living in Chiapas are among the most impoverished populations of Mexico. “Their marginalized conditions are not caused by lack of economic resources or because their conditions of underdevelopment” (Ruiz García 1994b). Rather, as most studies on Chiapas confirm, marginalization is produced by unjust political and social structures based on the exploitation of land and exclusion of indigenous people (see Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996; Poynton 1997; Collier 1995; and Tejera Gaona 1997). At the local level, Indígenas perceive their marginalized condition as caused by adverse intentions of economic and political institutions. “The government and the *finqueros* [rich landowners] are the same thing. They are together and they want to screw the Indians” (quoted in Benjamin 1996, 223).

Indeed the distribution of power and wealth within Chiapas has changed very little in the last fifty years. The occurrence of poverty among the indigenous people of Chiapas was not a consequence of lack of economic expansion. In fact, by the 1970s, Chiapas had increased its cultivated land to 850,000 hectares over the 270,000 in the 1950s (Benjamin 1996, 225) and the Highlands soon became very important in coffee production representing 40 percent of the total agricultural value of the state. But the “sordid association” of caciques, landowners, police, and corrupted politicians made Chiapas a land of inequalities and discrimination.

The socio-economic situation of Chiapas has become even more complicated during the last decade. The structural adjustment programs enforced by the Salina de Gortari’s administration (1988-1994), in order to integrate Mexico into the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), benefited rich Mexican and foreign investors at the expense of the poor

⁹ Recorded presentation of Samuel Ruiz Garcia at Loyola University at the opening of the *Living Faith: Stories of Justice* Conference. Chicago: November 13, 2000.

and indigenous sectors of the population.¹⁰ As Bishop Ruiz concluded in the 1993 pastoral letter

In This Hour of Grace:

We have to speak out about the present economic system that oppresses us. The wealthy need two things to be able to continue this path of enrichment: privatization and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). These two things are necessary for capitalism to continue to benefit wealthy and powerful investors, both Mexican and international; in turn this new economic model marginalizes thousands of campesinos and workers (Ruiz García 1993).

Historical racial discrimination also contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of Chiapas indigenous population. Throughout Mexico's history, indigenous populations have never been considered for government projects. Mexican nationalism has historically posed Mexicans as a 'Mestizo' (mixed race) identity, in opposition to the 'Indian' identity (Poynton 1997). In the Mexican national ideology of '*mestizaje*,'¹¹ appearance and behavior, not ancestry and descent, are the key indicators of racial identity. So, an indigenous person can transcend his or her indigenous identity by adopting the *Mestizo* behaviors, clothing and manners of 'modern' Mexico. In this way, Mexican nationalism has adopted a racist attitude toward those 'Indian' people who continued to show their external cultural signs of their traditions and living in poverty (see Viqueira 1995 and Gall 1998). This negative perception of 'Indian' identity was reflected in the 1990 Mexican national census that recorded only 7.8 percent of the population as 'Indian

¹⁰ From 1980 to 1991 Mexico received thirteen structural adjustment loans from the World Bank. In 1992, after four years of the Salinas administration Mexico ranked first in the world in nonpoverty lending by the world bank with more than \$12 billion pesos in outstanding loans (see Barry 1994). Ouweneel (1996) explains how most of the money (2.5 billion pesos in 1993) distributed in Chiapas with PRONASOL programs went to in the pockets of caciques and PRI supporters failing to curtail rural poverty in Chiapas.

¹¹ *Mestizaje* is the idea that *Mestizo* Mexico is a post-colonial, mixed race of population. This national identity is in theory "nonracial" but racism continues and indigenous identity is marginalized as a result. *Mestizaje* is opposed to indigenous identity but not to *Indigenismo*, which became the national ideology supporting national programs for integrating the indigenous population into the *Mestizo* nation (see: Poynton, 1997; Tejera Gaona, 1997 and Bartolomé, 1997).

people' (Rivas 1995). Most of the indigenous population of Mexico (78 percent) is concentrated in the southern states of Chiapas, Oaxaca, Guerrero and Yucatan. With the 1994 Zapatista rebellion, the claim of the indigenous people "Never again a Mexico without us [the indigenous people]" challenged national neoliberal and *Mestizo* ideologies. It also challenged common stereotypes of submissive "Indians" unable to reason (Bartolomé 1997) and invited Mexico and the world to look at the Indigenous of Chiapas to recognize the contradictory consequences of economic and cultural impositions.

Understanding Chiapas, the Highlands and Chenalhó

The popular phrase "Chiapas is Mexico," suggests that the political, economic, and cultural marginalization suffered by the indigenous people of Chiapas is representative of the plight faced by indigenous and peasants people throughout the country. Nevertheless, the phrase does not imply that Chiapas' socio-economic context is the same as Mexico's. The ethnic composition of Chiapas, along with its political and geographical characteristics, substantially differs from the rest of Mexico. Actually, the prevalence of Mayan descendants, the mountainous landscape and the distinguished presence of Protestant churches (between 20 to 51 percent in 1990), make the state of Chiapas more similar to Guatemala than to the rest of Mexico. It is the southernmost state of Mexico and shares a border with Guatemala. Chiapas' territory is about half size of the state of Illinois, or about three times the area of my Italian native region, Tuscany. About 60 percent of its population (circa 3.9 million) live in rural areas, whereas most of the

Mexican population (circa 97.3 million) live in urban areas (about 71 percent).¹² John Womack (1999) suggests how Chiapas more realistically reflects what most Americans and Europeans think of Mexico: an exotic place where Indians live in rural areas.

Although the movement of recuperating a national identity rooted in their Aztec and Mayan ancestors is quite strong all over Mexico, only eight percent of the entire Mexican population speaks a native language. This reality is quite different compared to Chiapas where the Estimated Indigenous Population (EIP) is 41 percent (Mendez Asensio and Cano Gimeno 1994). The difference is even more noticeable if we compare this with a particular region of Chiapas: the Highlands (*Los Altos*). In the Highlands, more than 81 percent of the people belong to an indigenous group and Chenalhó is one of those municipalities with the highest concentration of indigenous population: 98.4 percent (CIACH, CONPAZ, SIPRO 1997, 85).

According to several authors, Chiapas distinguishes itself from the rest of Mexico even in land distribution (Benjamin 1996; Barry 1995; Collier and Quaratiello 1994; Harvey 1998). The implementation of the so-called agrarian reforms stipulated by the 1917 Mexican Constitution failed to reach several regions in Chiapas where large landowners succeeded in blocking land reform (Nash 1995).

Politically, Chiapas has been more conservative than the rest of Mexico. Until the 2000 presidential elections, Chiapas has been a bastion of electoral support for the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* or PRI party that had ruled Mexico since the 1910 Mexican Revolution. In the 1988 presidential elections, the PRI claimed 89.9 percent of the Chiapas vote

¹² For a more detailed demographic analysis of Mexico and Chiapas see Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI): XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 2000, Censo Económicos 1999 and Indicadores de Desarrollo Sustentable en México. These publications can be found in the Internet at: <http://www.inegi.gob.mx/>

(Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996). In the July 2, 2000 presidential election, Vicente Fox Quesada, from the conservative *Partido Acción Nacional* (PAN) was elected president, ending 71 years of continuous PRI rule. But in Chiapas he won by default, many voters did not go to vote: he won by absenteeism (*La Jornada* [Mexico City], 3 July 2000). About 48 percent of the people failed to go to vote because paramilitaries and PRI supporters' impediments and threats (*Ibid.*). It was with the state elections, a month later, that Chiapas changed its reputation as a PRI supporter. Thanks to careful grassroots work of political consciousness raising made by numerous NGOs and as result of the coalition of eight opposition parties (*Alianza for Chiapas*), on August 20, 2000, Pablo Salazar Mendiguchía, a candidate of the *Partido de Revolución Democrática* (PRD), won the election as State Governor of Chiapas.

The geography of Chiapas is also important in understanding the formation of economic struggles and cultural resistance. An attentive observation of natural features of Chiapas explains the diversity in its development of regional networks of communication and indigenous identities of resistance. There are about nine socio-economic regions in Chiapas, all running northwest to southwest, roughly parallel to each other. The region in the north and east of the state is rain forest. The eastern portion of this region is called the Selva Lacandona or Lacandon Jungle, where the EZLN clandestinely organized the movement. South and west of the rain forest are the Chiapas Highlands, where the city of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, formerly named Ciudad Real, is located. Twenty-some indigenous municipalities surround San Cristóbal de Las Casas.

South and west of the Highlands is the central valley, containing the state capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez, then another mountainous region, and finally the relatively prosperous Soconusco, a low plain on the Pacific coast. All the events of the rebellion took place in the Highlands and Lacandon region, the territory of the San Cristóbal de Las Casas Diocese (SCLC) where most of

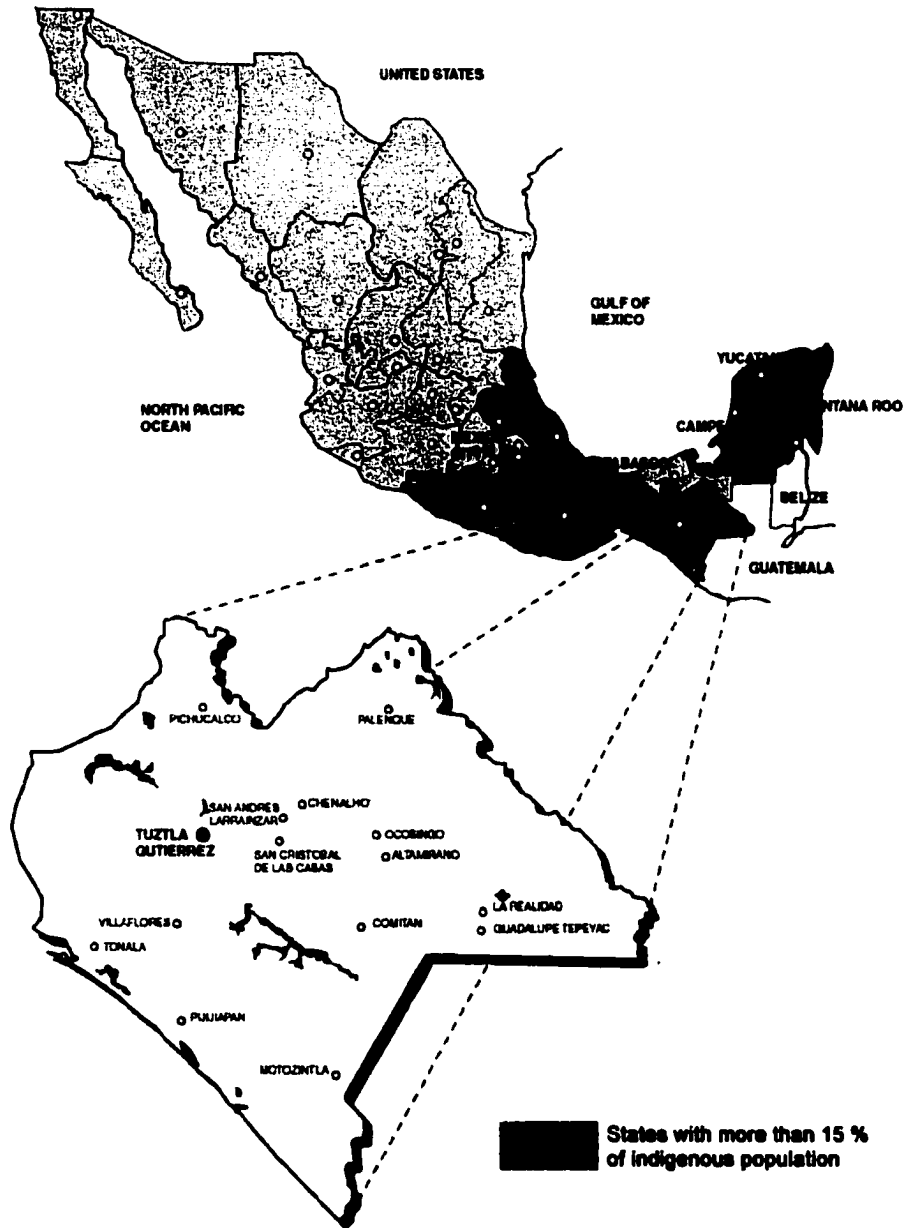
the indigenous people live.

Because its mountainous regions, Chiapas was long considered the most backward and isolated state of Mexico. Not long ago, roads connecting indigenous villages in the Highlands and Lacandon regions were rare. This not only slowed communication but also blocked the connection of potable water, electricity, and telephone systems.

The Highlands of Chiapas comprehends a territory larger than the socio-economic region called *Los Altos*. The Highlands are located at 5000 feet (about 1500 meters) above sea level and a surface of about 86 square miles (about 139 square kilometers).

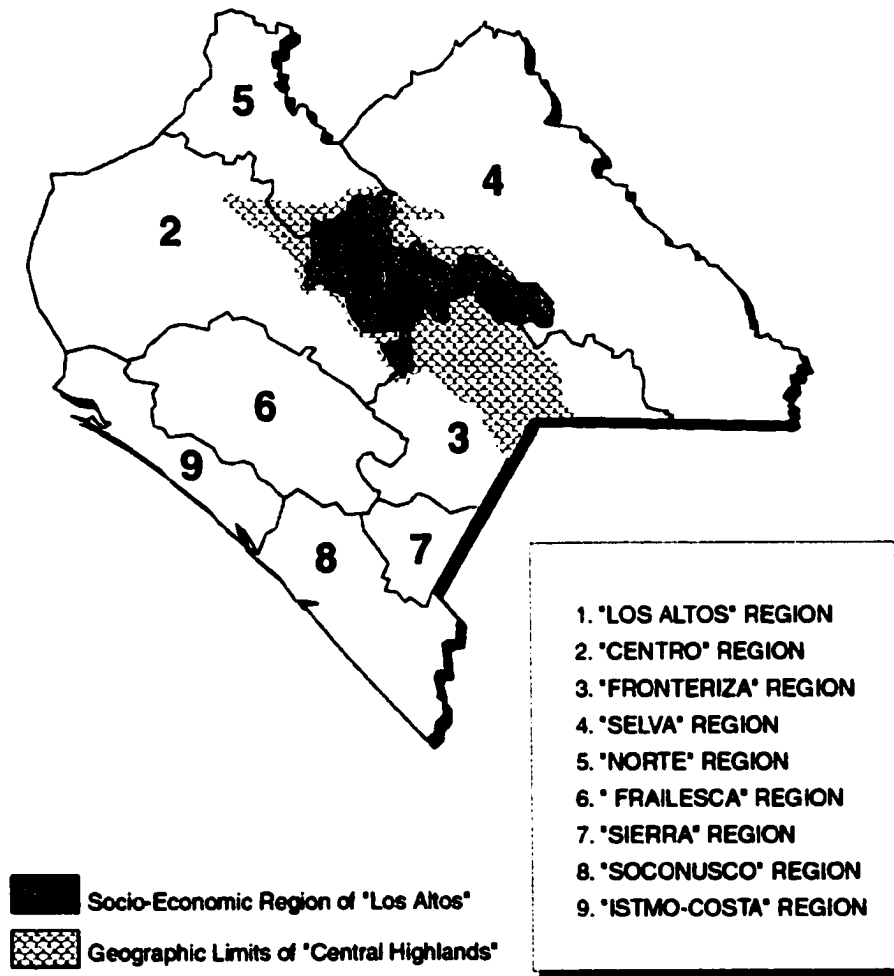
The numerous mountain and valley characteristics of this region offer visitors some very unique landscapes. Anthropologists and social scientists have studied the Highlands of Chiapas for well over fifty years. There are numerous ethnographies of the region, many of which take a longitudinal approach in examining political and economic changes and their effects on the Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous communities (see: Bricker and Gossen 1989; Collier 1975; Nash 1970; 1993; Vogt 1969). Anthropologists interested in isolated communities found interesting subjects of research in the diversified cultural context of the Highlands. Still today, the Highlands' diversification into various indigenous groups and subgroups is not found in the lowlands. The close relationship between indigenous identity, resistance and colonialism and the strange interplay between nation-state's suppression of indigenous ethnicity and appropriation of indigenous cultural symbols is not necessarily duplicated in the low lands (Field 1990, 245).

Map 3.1: Chiapas and the Indigenous (Deep) Mexico



(Source: CIACH, CONPAZ, SIPRO 1997; Bonfil Batalla, 1996)

Map 3.2: The Highlands and Other Regions of Chiapas



(Source: Cartas Geográficas del Estado de Chiapas, 1995; CIACH, CONPAZ and SIPRO, 1997)

Map 3.3: Municipalities in the Highlands (Los Altos) Region



MUNICIPALITIES

- | | |
|-------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. ALDAMA | 10. MITONTIC |
| 2. ALTAMIRANO | 11. OXCHUC |
| 3. AMATENANGO DEL VALLE | 12. PANTELHO' |
| 4. CHALCHIHUITAN | 13. LAS ROSAS |
| 5. CHAMULA | 14. SAN CRISTOBAL L.C. |
| 6. CHANAL | 15. TENEJAPA |
| 7. CHENALHO' | 16. TEOPISCA |
| 8. HUIXTAN | 17. ZINACANTAN |
| 9. LARRAINZAR | |

(Source: Cartas Geográficas del Estado de Chiapas 1995; ECOSUR 1999).

Map 3.4: The Chenalhó Municipality



(Source: COCOPA, 1998)

Chenalhó is one of the 15 municipalities that speak Tzotzil. It is the county where the organization *Las Abejas* was founded and where most of them still live. The word *Ch'enaló* in Tzotzil means, "water from well of rock." From my interviews with the elderly in the region, this referred to an old spring that had the curious shape of a cup (Fieldnotes, October 1999).

According to the 2000 Census of the population, the municipality of Chenalhó counts 30,876 people and almost all of them are of indigenous origins.¹³ The main ethnic group in Chenalhó is Tzotzil (74.6%) with a small percentage of Tzeltal (3.4%), concentrated in the locality of Los Chorros. Some of the Tzotzil families in Chenalhó are originally from Aldama, Magdalena, and Chamula, but the majority of them are originally from the municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó and they are commonly called *Pedranos*. The head of the municipality (*cabecera*), San Pedro Chenalhó, gives the name to the municipality. It is located about 29 kilometers north of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, on the way to Chamula. If we continue on the same road, we encounter Santa Caterina Pantelhó, in the Pantelhó municipality. The distance between San Pedro Chenalhó and Santa Caterina Pantelhó is about 39 kilometers, which is also the length of the territory of Chenalhó municipality. These distances are important factors in the frequent intercommunity communications of *Las Abejas*. Even though the principal road of communication from San Pedro Chenalhó and Santa Caterina Pantelhó has been asphalted, many people of *Las Abejas* prefer to walk through the mountains and valleys, in order to save money and avoid the paramilitaries and military checkpoints.

Chenalhó is one of the most marginalized and disadvantaged municipalities in the Highlands. For example, it ranks forth worst in malnutrition in the state of Chiapas (CDHFBC 1998). According to official government statistics, more than 93 percent of the population of Chenalhó earns an income equivalent to only half a minimum wage salary. Currently this is

¹³ The official statistics of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geografía e Informática (INEGI): XII Censo General de Población y Vivienda, 2000 reports Chenalhó municipality totally inhabited by indigenous people. The CDHFBC observes how in the non-indigenous population used to maintain the control of trading, transport, education and administrative positions in the principal towns of Los Altos. The indigenous population, however, pressured them to leave and occupied those social positions before being controlled exclusively by non-indigenous people.

\$2,820 Pesos (\$304USD) a month in Mexico.¹⁴

Table 3.1: Socio-Economic Indicators of Chenalhó, Chiapas and Mexico

Indicador	Chenalhó	Chiapas	Mexico
Total Population	30,876	3,920,515	97,361,711
Estimated Indigenous Population (EIP)	30,680	1,028,766	8,701,688
Percentage of EIP	99%	41%	10%
Illiteracy Rate (Pop. less than 15 years)	51%	31%	13%
People living in rural areas	92%	60%	29%
People living in houses with dirt floor	90%	58%	N/A
Access to Electricity	21%	33%	N/A
Access to Drainage	11%	58%	N/A
Access to Running Water	44%	41%	N/A
Displaced People in 1999	10,500	18,826	N/A

(Source: INEGI 1993; 2000; CIACH, CONPAZ, SIPRO 1997).

Precarious socio-economic conditions are a common denominator among indigenous people of Chiapas. Lack of land property, among other socio-economic factors, remains one of the central causes of indigenous poverty and rebellion (Collier 1994; Harvey 1998). Numerous studies have traced how the lack of land in Chiapas has contributed to the formation of indigenous resistance movements (Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996; Benjamin 1996; Collier 1994;

¹⁴ These values refer to the January 2000 'official' minimum wage salary of the Banco de Mexico: *Indice de Salario Minimo Generale*. Available at www.banxico.org.mx. For a more detailed statistics on actual minimum wage salary in Chiapas see Centro Nacional de Desarrollo Municipal (Codemun). *Los Municipios en Mexico. Información para el Desarrollo*, (Mexico, 1997).

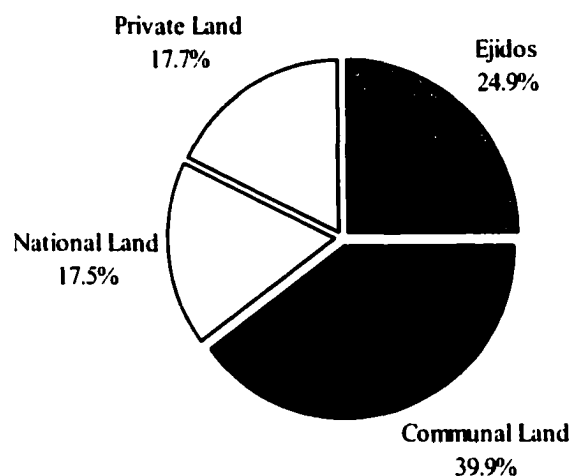
2000; Harvey 1994; 1998). Since the 1970s, poor peasants, mostly indigenous, simply invaded the lands of richer (often *Mestizo*) landowners in the Highlands and Lacandon regions of Chiapas (García de León 1984; Harvey 1990). Land invasions greatly increased in the Highlands and Lacandon Jungle with the new enthusiasm created by the 1994 Zapatista rebellion (see Solís Villafuerte 1999). Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to depict the socio-economic struggle of these two regions only as a contention between landless indigenous-peasant people versus rich landowners. To fully understand the situation it is necessary to understand the background of land ownership in Chiapas and agrarian laws in Mexico. Mayan indigenous communities of Chiapas and Guatemala have owned land corporately for many centuries. In this form of property, it is the community, rather than individuals or households that hold land property rights (Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996). Communal land ownership is recognized as a characteristic of the Tzotzil-indigenous culture that, to guarantee its communal use, forbids fencing in its territory (Holmes 1961, 40). Each communal portion measures approximately ten hectares and all the Tzotziles of the municipality have a right to cultivate a portion of it. Until the early 1990s, communal land and the so-called *ejidos*¹⁵ were the two most common forms of land ownership among indigenous people in the Highlands of Chiapas (Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996, 522).

In the Highlands, the management of *Ejido* lands followed the communal practices of the indigenous communities, who under the direction of ejido laws, elected ejido committees (Collier 1975). It was the ejido committee that regulated inheritance of ejido lands in the families and the obligations of ejido beneficiaries to work the land and pay taxes on it (Cancian 1992). Until 1992, if the ejido beneficiary did not work or pay taxes on the ejido land, the ownership returned to the

¹⁵ Collectively owned and individually cultivated plots allotted to cultivators who established residence in colonies (see: Benjamin, 1996 and Barry, 1995)

community, which was never allowed to sell it.

Chart 3.1: Land Ownership Systems in Chenalhó (1998)



(Source: CDHFBC 1998, 5)

Despite frequent collective land ownership, indigenous people generally do not cultivate it communally. With the exception of some communal grazing, especially after harvesting, the extent of cooperation among Tzotzil people seems to have been limited to the help of a few neighbors, generally family, for clearing and harvesting the field (Collier 1975). Tzotzil indigenous communities, as horticultural societies whose main subsistence crops are beans and corn, had little need for much community cooperation (Ibid).

Beans and corn are the products most commonly cultivated in the lands of Chenalhó. Corn is the principal ingredient in the Tzotzil diet. Corn is also at the center of their religious symbolism and used in all traditional religious ceremonies (Holmes 1961, 42). In the traditional Mayan cosmology, corn symbolizes the union of human beings with God. For a Tzotzil, corn

cannot grow in the wild. Only a carefully tended cornfield will yield a crop. Thus, according to Tzotzil-Mayan beliefs, God shares his creative power by knowing the secret of planting and cultivating corn. Even in communities of Los Altos where Indigenous people no longer focus exclusively on food production, the attachment to the land and to their identity as peasants continues.

George Collier's analysis of land tenure in connection with the Zapatista rebellion recognizes this continuity in the attachment of Zinacatecos¹⁶ to the land (Collier and Quaratiello 1994; see also Collier 1975).

And even the wealthiest peasants who make their living primarily in such nonagricultural enterprises as trucking and retailing, identify themselves as farmers. Emotional ties to the land persist even where the practical ties to the land have withered. Peasants still consider the land their basis for survival (Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 108).

Unfortunately, Collier does not go deeper in his analysis, he only justifies this persistence as an "emotional tie." He fails to recognize that in the Highlands, even among people who are not primarily involved in agriculture, products from the land still remain an essential component in family economies. In addition, Collier does not distinguish between indigenous and non-indigenous peasants. The religious and cultural relationship with the land is much stronger among indigenous-peasant people. Land is not only linked to their economic survival, but most of all to their religious identity and cultural belonging as indigenous Mayan people. Owning and farming one's own land is a recent phenomenon in Chenalhó. Prior to the 1940s, only a handful of wealthy *Ladino* families held tracts of land in the municipality. Tzotzil-Mayan families usually worked for them on these lands. After the 1940s, most indigenous families received ejido lands,

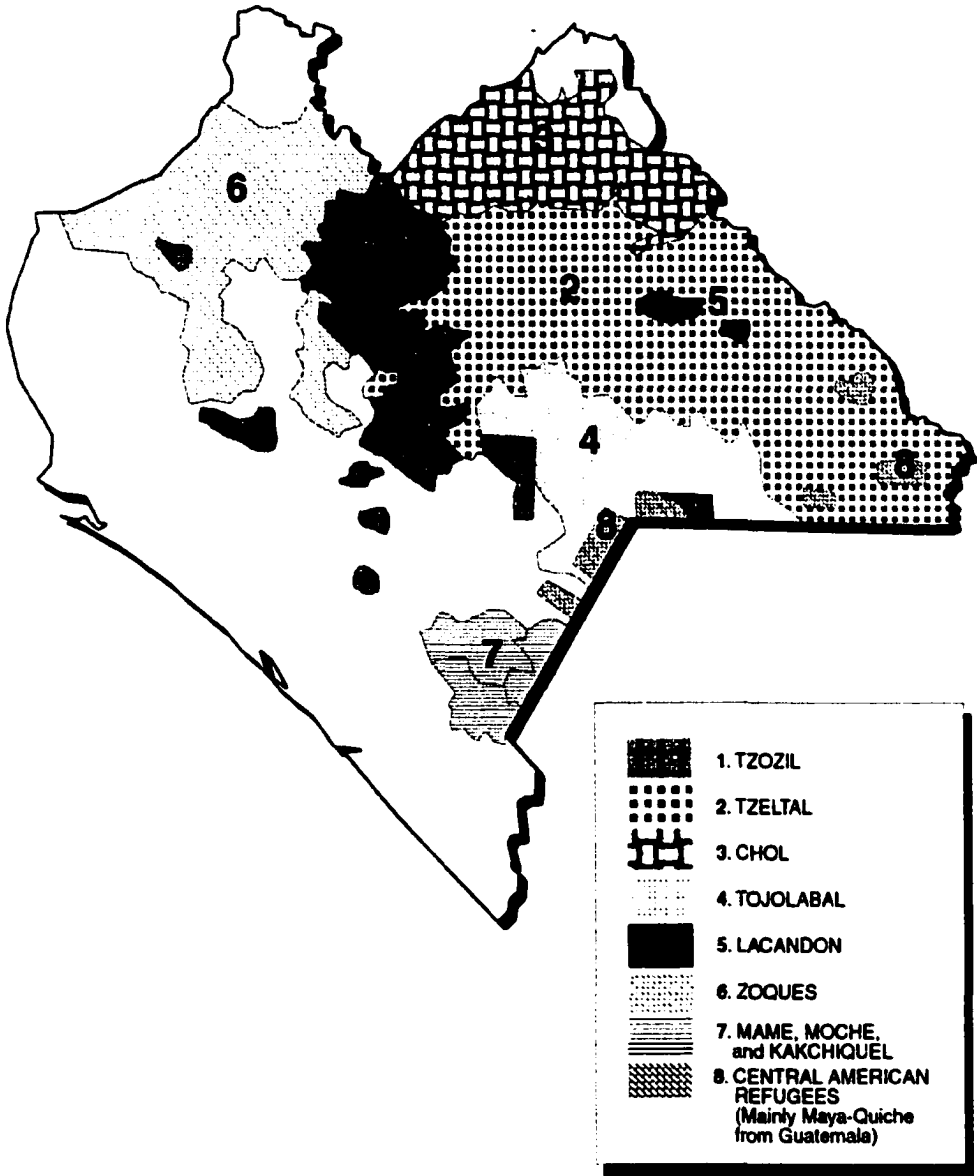
¹⁶ The inhabitants of Zinacantan, a small province in the Los Altos region of Chiapas.

substantially ameliorating differences among them based on property. For the first time, every household in the municipality of Chenalhó was able to cultivate corn and beans for their own families. Looking at the ethnic composition of Chiapas will further help us understand the enduring value attributed to land in the northeastern regions of Chiapas.

The Tzotziles and Indigenous People of Chiapas

Indigenous communities comprise about 10 percent of the entire 97 million population of Mexico (INEGI 2000). The Indigenous communities tend to be geographically concentrated in Southern México. The largest indigenous populations reside in Oaxaca (52.7 percent of the state's population), Yucatán (52.4 percent), Quintana Roo (36.7 percent), Chiapas (35.1 percent), Hidalgo (26.3 percent), and Campeche (25.4 percent) (INI, La Jornada 15 September 1996). It is not an accident that among the poorest Mexican states, Chiapas and Oaxaca have substantial Indigenous populations. Numerous authors have recognized how the combination of ethnicity, poverty, resistance, and militarization respond to a clear government's counterrevolution plans (Castro and Hidalgo 1999a; Fazio 1996; Rochlin 1997; López 1996). In Mexico, indigenous people are about one third of the people living in poverty (Government of Mexico 1992, 57). Over 80 percent of Mexico's indigenous communities struggle with abject poverty and about 60 percent of these communities record significant indigenous emigration due to abysmal living conditions (Rochlin 1997).

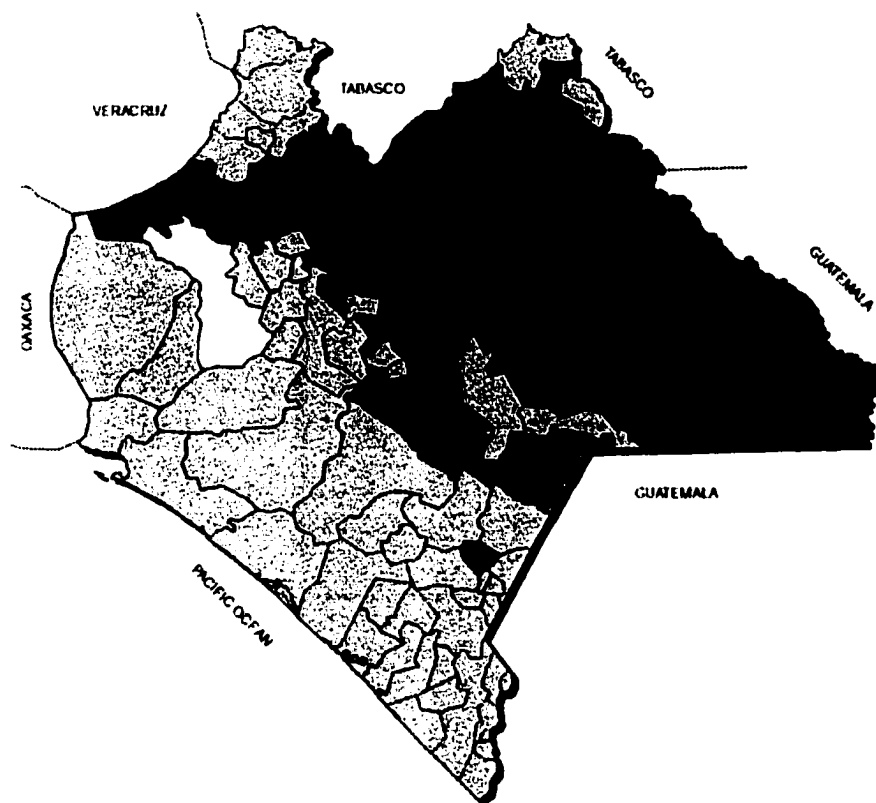
Map 3.5: Indigenous Groups of Chiapas








(Source: INI 1995; ECOSUR 1998)

Map 3.6: Indigenous Concentration in Chiapas

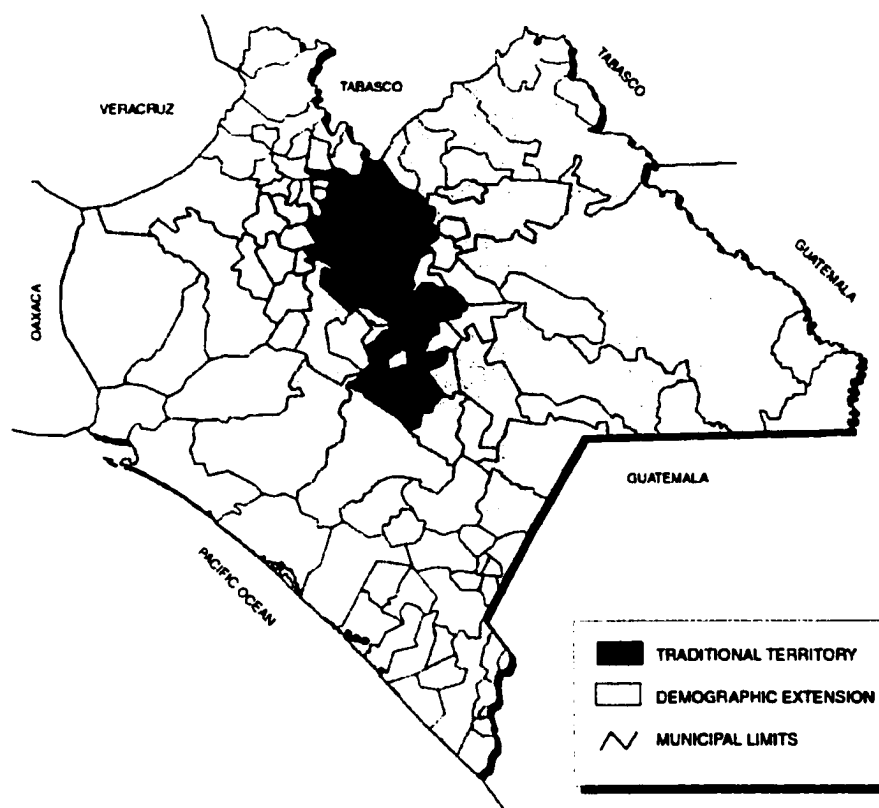
(Population that speak indigenous languages, above 5 years old)



	LABEL	PERCENTAGE
	VERY HIGH	MORE THAN 86.1%
	HIGH	FROM 86.1 TO 57.4%
	MEDIUM	FROM 57.3 TO 28.8%
	LOW	FROM 28.7 TO 9.9%
	VERY LOW	LESS THAN 9.9%

(Source: INEGI 1990; INI 1993)

Map 3.7: Tzotzil Presence in Chiapas



(Source: INI, Atlas Lenguas Indígenas 1996)

Contrary to what is commonly thought about the state of Chiapas, it is not the region with the highest concentration of indigenous people (Gall 1998, 244). Among the so-called “ethnic regions”, Chiapas stands in fourth place with just 35 percent of the local population being indigenous (Viqueira 1995). In addition, Chiapas does not have the highest percentage of speakers of a Mayan language. Nevertheless, Chiapas is the state with the largest number (230,000) and percentage (8.5 percent) of indigenous people that do not speak Spanish. The fact that nearly one third of the indigenous population of Chiapas cannot communicate with *Mestizos*

explains the accentuated character of *Ladino*-indigenous opposition and ultimately of racism (Viqueira 1995 and Gall 1998). The causes that generated the EZLN rebellion in Chiapas are certainly a result of the combination of socio-economic, political, as well as cultural and religious frameworks. But it is also caused by the exclusion of the indigenous population from the southeast region of Mexico.

The majority of *Las Abejas* identify themselves with the Tzotzil-Mayan indigenous group of San Pedro Chenalhó. The so-called 'Pedranos' Tzotzil people are one of the many indigenous groups that speak Tzotzil. To be more specific, the Pedranos speak a Tzotzil dialect, which belongs to the larger group Tzotzil-Tzeltal of the family Mayan-Quiché, and of the Mayan-Zoque family sub-group (Holmes 1961, 17).

Tzotzil people have always been a target of discriminatory practices and attitudes from the *Ladinos* and *Mestizo* population. Olivia Gall (1998) observes how a colonial-style ethnocentric racism has always existed in the Highlands of Chiapas. Miguel Chanteau, the former French Catholic priest in the parish of Chenalhó observed this discriminatory reality. When the Mexican government "coincidentally" expelled him after the Acteal massacre, he declared to the French press:

I saw the apartheid between the Indians and *Mestizos* in the Highlands. There are still people in Chiapas who consider the Indians to be 'people with no reason,' as in the time of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas. In my parish, the first day I celebrated the mass in Tzotzil the *Mestizos* left the church. When I said 'my Indian brothers or sisters,' they answered me: You may well be their brother, not us" (La Jornada, March 4 1998).

June Nash (1995) further observed how in Chiapas indigenous identity is not based on numbers and percentages. Reclaiming indigenous rights and autonomy is also effect of a reassertion process of Highland communities facing economic inequality linked to racism and

repression (ibid). The reassertion of indigenous dignity, promoted and supported by the work of religious and political organizations who choose to accompany and respect rather than to teach and repress, becomes an essential process in the resistance to rapid and uncontrolled change endorsed by Mexico's neoliberal agenda for Chiapas. Chiapas' racial discrimination against indigenous people represented a fertile terrain for the economic and political domination exemplified in recent and historical struggles for land reform in Chiapas.

Neoliberalism Effects on Land

National and international corporate interests in the land of Chiapas became evident in the early 1980s. Responding to the OPEC crisis in 1972, Mexico borrowed conspicuous amounts of money internationally in order to implement oil production for export and to finance ambitious projects of development. As George Collier explains, "Mexico, propelled by energy development, became more and more oriented toward foreign markets and away from food-self sufficiency" (Collier 1994, 16). Encouraged by President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989), Mexico became dependent upon corn imports from the USA and questioned land use for agricultural production. After the 1982 Mexico crisis over its \$96 billion foreign debt, the encouragements became mandatory as the IMF, pressed by neoliberal economic planners of US-based TNCs, forced Mexico to accept austere economic restructuring. Mexico used new credits to finance new oil explorations in Tabasco and Eastern Chiapas where two new dams were also built along the Chiapas' Grijalva River. By the end of the 1980s, Chiapas was producing more than 55 percent of the total hydroelectric energy for Mexico and Mexican Petroleum (PEMEX) was producing 90,000 barrels of oil a day. Today, Chiapas produces 22 percent of the national oil production. The government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari, after he claimed the presidency in disputed elections in 1988, further implemented the integration of Mexico into the new global economy.

Harvard University educated, Salinas favored neoliberal economic reforms in place of land reforms implemented after the 1910 Mexican Revolution.

The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), became the clearest sign of the Mexican government's program of integration into the neoliberal economy (Smith and Korzeniewicz 1997). Certain sectors of Mexican and international civil society criticize NAFTA and the economic global integration of neoliberalism for breaking up social dimensions such as communicative interactions, critical public spheres and collective identities. In other words, neoliberalism in Mexico tends to undermine cultural traditions and increase poverty (Zermeño 1997). As implemented by the Mexican government in the 1990s, the neoliberal economic model could be labeled a "fragmented and exclusionary democracy" (Acuña and Smith 1994).

Integration of Mexico into the world economy has affected corn producers in different ways. Chiapas, along with Guerrero and Oaxaca, is one of the largest producers of corn surpluses, which are then exported to the rest of Mexico (Fox and Navarro 1992). With the 1986 signing of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), later renamed World Trade Organization (WTO), and the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreements (NAFTA) in 1994, the government favored large scale producers of agricultural products such as fruit, vegetable and cattle that were generally exported outside of Mexico (Appendini 1992). Small-scale producers of corn and beans, such as the case of indigenous cooperatives in the Highlands of Chiapas, are negatively impacted by these agreements. The government did not protect these crops from foreign competitors who imported tons of cheap corn and other crops into the Mexican market (ibid). Absent protectionist policies favored the integration of local, regional economies into the world economies but made peasant-indigenous communities of Chiapas more vulnerable to the cycle and fluctuation of global capitalism (Gilpin 2000).

The decline of coffee prices in the early 1990s has also hurt indigenous and non-indigenous coffee producers of the Highlands. Problems caused by low coffee prices, which also affected the Lacandon Jungle, helped spark the 1994 Zapatista rebellion (Collier 1994; Barry 1995). It is no coincidence that the price Highland indigenous coffee producers received for a kilo of coffee almost doubled a few months after the rebellion. Although the land devoted to corn production in the Highlands is eight times more than the one occupied by coffee plants (INEGI 1993), it does not necessarily mean that the effect of coffee price changes in the indigenous population is minimal (cf. Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996, 525). We need to keep in mind that most plots of ejido and communal lands devoted to the production of coffee are cash crops, essential in growing out of a subsistence economy.

Economic neoliberal reforms affect Highland indigenous communities in a similar manner to the Mexican modernization programs started in the 1970s (Benjamin 1996; Cancian 1992; Collier 1987). Initiated in the 1950s by the work of national government institutions such as INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista), taken over in the 1970s by PRODESCH (Programa de Desarrollo Economico y Social de Los Altos de Chiapas), and followed by the antipoverty programs called PRONASOL (Programa Nacional de Solidaridad) promoted during the 1988-1994 presidency of Salinas de Gortari (Benjamin 1996; Appendini 1992; Harvey 1998; Collier 1987 1994). Governmental statistical studies bear witness that these programs have greatly improved the economy, literacy, health, housing and living conditions of the people of the Highlands (INEGI 1985 1993 1995; Whitmeyer 1993). However, it has recognized that such public funds were directed to reduce social discontent by financing PRI affiliated programs and maintaining local caciques. During Salinas's six years of government, "money tended to be expanded where protest was greatest, except in the Lacandon Jungle where there were no polling

booths and the settlers never voted” (Nash 1995, 20). Nevertheless, the implementation of neoliberalism in Chiapas directly attacked land ownership in Chiapas and mined the 1910 Mexican Revolution’s core value of land redistribution.

Article 27, as originally formulated in the 1917 Mexican Constitution, viewed land as intrinsically communitarian in nature (Collier 1975). The Revolution came from peasants, both indigenous and *Mestizos*, impoverished and landless mainly because of the politics of the dictator Porfirio Díaz (1876-1910) who excessively relied on foreign and domestic capitalists involved in the export economy (see Wolf 1959, 1-26; Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996). As a consequence of Díaz’s liberal policies, numerous indigenous of Chiapas lost a substantial amount of their lands to non-indigenous or *Mestizo* ranchers.

The 1910 Mexican Revolution wanted to reverse this trend and, by creating the system of land ownership, attempted to restore land to indigenous communities that had lost it (Ishii 1973). Unfortunately, in Chiapas an effective redistribution of land was slow to arrive, blocked by politically powerful landowners. Thirty years after the revolution, about 50 percent of the land in the Highlands was held by ejidos of communal farms, but the wealthy and politically powerful *Ladino* minority retained the best lands and the resources to develop these lands (Burbach and Rosset 1994; Benjamin 1996). The incomplete land redistribution and the low quality of the land distributed is one of the main reasons why ‘land’ remains one of the main concerns of the indigenous communities of the Highlands (Collier 1975; Collier and Quaratiello 1994). For more than 80 years, this incomplete land distribution insured the maintenance of economic inequality between landowners and indigenous communities in Chiapas. Many agree that, even after numerous social and economic programs promoted between 1940-1980, high levels of economic inequality and poverty continue to characterize the indigenous populations of Chiapas mainly

because of the lack of access to land and its resources (Benjamin 1996; Wollack 1994; Harvey 1994 1998; Collier 1994; Collier and Quaratiello 1994). Even though different authors have challenged the assumption that “land reform never arrived in Chiapas” (cf. Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996), it has been recognized that only a few communities managed to get ejido lands in the Highlands (Nash 1995). Many acted too late, but many others never received state support of their claims or only received a minimal portion of their claims (Ibid, 12).

With the 1992 amendment of Article 27, the Mexican government eliminated the inalienable guarantee of communal property for ejidos, allowing them to be sold, rented or mortgaged. This reform ended land redistribution and made it possible for foreign investors to buy or invest in existing ejido lands. Although the reformed Article 27 recognizes the specificity of indigenous people’s claim to protection of their lands (Hindley 1996, 238), no positive conditions are actually provided for such protection. Experts on Mexican legislation comment that if the reform of Article 27 would have been done in consultation with the National Indigenous Institute (INI), indigenous land rights would have been included (Aitken et al. 1996). “The exclusionary way and speed with which the new agrarian legislation was formulated and passed was a clear demonstration of executive priorities and power” (Hindley 1996, 236). The consequence was that for many indigenous peasants, this reform represented the killing of hope. Indeed, Subcomandante Marcos indicated that this was the ultimate act of betrayal that pushed the Zapatistas to bear arms:

The government really screwed us, now that they have destroyed Article 27, for which Zapata and his revolutionaries fought. Salinas de Gortari arrived on the scene with his lackeys, and his group, and in a flash they destroyed it. Our families have been sold down the river, or you could say, they have stolen our pants and sold them. What can we do? We did everything legal that we could so far as elections and organizations were concerned, and to no avail (*El Tiempo* [Mexico City] 6 February 1994).

According to Burbach and Rosset (1994, 32), the goal of the reform was to open the market to the strategic importance of Chiapas' lands. Chiapas land is extremely important for Mexico and the United States not only for its wealth of resources , but also because of its geographic position as the corridor of communication between North and South America. These economic interests took precedence over the ongoing political negotiations and accelerated the amendment of Article 27 (Aitken et al. 1996). What resulted were only promises of guarantees that indigenous ejido lands would not be alienated (Nash 1995). But most indigenous groups are aware that if *ejidatarios* (ejido holders) are not able to repay the loans made in joint enterprises on communal lands, banks could take the land. Consequently, the reform of Article 27 also signaled the shift of many indigenous communities from civil to violent resistance (Tangeman 1995, 13).

A pre-existing crisis among indigenous peasant people of Chiapas was produced by Salinas' liberalization of corn prices (Harvey 1994, 7-8). A general feeling of discontent soon turned into feelings of hopelessness for a better future, which increased EZLN enrollments and grassroots supporters (Le Bot 1997, 239-262). Nevertheless, indigenous economic discontent and PRI's political weakness are not the only explanations for the emergence and mobilization of new indigenous movements in Chiapas. We need to consider how those changes produced discontent at cultural, religious, social and international level. In other words, Chiapas indigenous resistance does not find sufficient explanation only by considering community solidarity emerging from communal land property (Skocpol 1979; Wolf 1969; Wickham-Crowley 1992). Highland indigenous communities interpret neoliberal reforms in conjunction with the cultural meanings of land and dignity.

A Double Root of Identity: Land and Dignity

Beyond the 1994 Zapatista demands for education, political participation, health, housing and work, the Chiapas rebellious indigenous movement expressed fundamental claims for land and dignity. The Chiapas movement recognized that both indigenous land ownership and cultural dignity are essential elements for the establishment of peace and pluralism in the Mexico of the 21st century (Schulz and Williams 1995). Only through this respectful inclusion of the indigenous population in politico-economic and cultural national identity will Mexico find the basis for building a new nation. Development and investment programs in the rich land of Chiapas must take the interests of the indigenous people into consideration (Collier 1995; Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996). "We cannot continue to build the Mexico of the future over the graves of the indigenous people, nor can [Mexico] ignore the most ancient roots of [its] national identity" (Ruiz García 1994a). As Bonfil Batalla (1997) argues, "Mexico is not a *Mestizo* country but a land whose majority of the population continues to be rooted in the Mesoamerican civilization." The real Mexico is built on the identity of the indigenous people, what he calls *Mexico Profundo* [deep Mexico] (Bonfil Batalla 1997).

Unfortunately, Mexico is caught in the well-known division between "dead indigenous people" and "living indigenous people" (see Benítez 1968, 47 and Gutiérrez 1999, 1). Dead Indians, constituting the central part of Mexican national identity contrast with the marginalized and excluded condition of living Indians (see Chapter 4). This contradictory reality of Mexican indigenous identity was finally shaken on January 1, 1994 when the EZLN took over four towns in the most indigenous concentrated regions of Chiapas. Numerous studies have identified the economic and ethnic roots of the rebellion (Collier 1994; Ross 1995; Gilbreth 1997; Ribeiro 1998; Yúdice 1998; Whitmeyer and Hopcroft 1996). Yet, little has been said about the meanings

that land and “Indianness” have in the construction of collective identity and action in Chiapas. The neozapatista movement clearly shows how land struggle for the indigenous people in rebellion is also a cultural issue. Non-indigenous immersed among indigenous communities in resistance view land in connection with the economic and cultural implications of ‘the people of the land.’ Subcomandante Marcos, the *Mestizo* reclaiming his indigenous identity among the indigenous comandantes, recognizes how at the root of their uprising is a clear consciousness of being excluded from land because they are Indígenas. “We have always lived amidst a war that, until now, was against us” (Proceso [Mexico City], 10 January 1994).

The EZLN have clearly reclaimed their rights to land and indigenous rights. But other indigenous groups and organizations indirectly committed with the EZLN are also conscious that their identity and resistance are also based on these very same issues of land and indigenous rights. Speaking of the larger neozapatista movement, of which *Las Abejas* is a part, better describes the ongoing resistance in Chiapas (see Harvey 1998, chapter 6). It would be inaccurate to state that “the primary difference between Mayans who are rebelling and those who are not committed is that the former are aware that as Indians they have been marginalized by the state and experienced marginalization in the markets they enter as seller of labors and products” (Nash 1995, 25). Not only the Zapatistas of the EZLN who have taken up arms and rebelled are conscious of the centrality of land and dignity. *Las Abejas*, as indigenous organization sympathizing but not directly affiliated with the EZLN, challenges this assumption.¹⁷ Not just “rebellious Chiapas” but “resistance Chiapas” better articulates the indigenous identity rooted on land and dignity. Numerous studies have recognized the connection between Chiapas indigenous

¹⁷ See the arguments on indigenous movements resisting as part of the Mexican *Sociedad Civil* (civil society) (Chapter 7 in this work).

tradition of resistance and rebellion and the EZLN conscious revolutionary analysis (Díaz 1998; Harvey 1998; Gilbreth 1997). Nevertheless, it is the perception of land and dignity that is at the heart of new Mesoamerican indigenous movements and organizations of resistance (Gutiérrez 1999; Haber 1996; Mattiace 1998; Nash 1995). The EZLN, defined as “the first Latin American guerrilla movement to emerge after the death of socialism” (Weinberg 2000, 16) is also the first with an indigenous collective leadership, to whom spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos is officially subordinated. The neozapatista movement is something new precisely because it is rooted in the identity of the indigenous people of Chiapas. Their identity is something unique because it is rooted in their struggle for land and dignity, as perceived by the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Tojolabal, Chol and other indigenous Mayan groups of Chiapas.

The Land is Our Mother: How Can They Sell Our mother?

Depicting Chiapas’ contrasting reality of a rich land with poor people (Benjamin 1996) does not say how the indigenous people view their land. During my fieldwork among *Las Abejas* communities, I have learned of their kin relationship to the land. While conscious of their economic and cultural oppression, they value land as their mother (Interview 27). “The land,” they told me, “is our life and our freedom [...]. The Indígenas without land are like trunks thrown out at the side of the road [...].” (Interview 22).

Besides being peasants, and therefore dependent on an agricultural economy, indigenous people of the Highlands have a religious relationship with their mother land that goes beyond subsistence. In their view, this perspective is contrasted by the *Ladino* view of land:

The *Ladinos* come, they kill us and they leave our lands like a tired desert behind them. They do not respect land and they sell it for profit. But, as a popular song says: Who has the right to sell their mother? Who is entitled to sell their sister? The land is our life and our freedom [...]. (Interview 25).

A few months after the beginning of the Zapatista rebellion, Father Gonzalo Ituarte, a SCLC Diocese Vicar, clarified how for indigenous people 'land' is more than a commodity. Indigenous relationship with their land has a cultural and religious character based on respect. In his words:

For the indigenous people, the land is much more than something to buy and sell; the land is their mother. When the indigenous people are preparing to plant, they first ask permission from the mother earth: "Forgive me, I'm going to hurt you. But we need the food that comes from you." Then they give thanks for the harvest. It's a sacred relationship. Nature is part of their lives. The new Mexican laws invite indigenous people to buy and sell their own mother. But for the landowners, land is a business (Ituarte 1998, 106).

People of *Las Abejas*, like other neozapatista organizations in Chiapas, recognize the government's decision to sell their land as a direct attack on their identity. As a director of a local NGO told me during an interview:

The identity of *Las Abejas*, as Mayan people, is rooted in their land. See the *Popol Vou*, the sacred book of the Mayans. It is clear that the Mayans are the people of the land, the people of the corn... When President Salinas changed Article 27 of the Constitution, the indigenous people of Chiapas asked him if he was able to sell his mother. Because for them, to privatize the land is like to sell their own mother... A peasant person can even change from one land to another, but not for the indigenous here. For *Las Abejas*, to break with their land is to break with the unity of their identity as a people and to end the nourishment for their civil resistance... (Interview 15).

During one of the organizational meetings of *Las Abejas*, I heard one of them say: "We cannot allow multinationals to spoil the blood of our mother" (Fieldnotes, 14 September 1999). He compared the coming of multinationals to the lands of Chiapas with the death of their water and their rivers. And he presented multinationals as "a cancer for mother earth..." (Ibid). The ecological dimension of the neozapatista rebellion (see O'Brien 1998) is rooted in the Indigenous people's strong attachment, almost vital, to their land. This character seems to be maintained even

in urban difficult conditions of forced displacement. As a pastoral worker of the diocese living in one of *Las Abejas* refugee camps in San Cristóbal commented:

The people here are very attached to their lands. Even if they are massacred and expelled from their places, they do not immigrate to the city but prefer to find refuge here in their mountains... And those families who had to go to San Cristóbal stayed at the outskirts where they can be spiritually close to the mountains and cultivate a bit of land. Their hearts belong to these mountains of the Highlands and they cannot separate themselves from these lands and waters [...]. (Interview 46).

From their strong attachment to land springs their organized resistance. As it happened in 1993, when Mexican Petroleum (PEMEX) arrived in Chenalhó to expropriate land and begin new oil perforations. *Las Abejas* organized public prayers and fasting in all 24 communities of their organization. "We were so worried because we knew we could have not survived without our land" (Interview 25). Preserving land rights and avoiding foreign exploitation is what inspired the recent foundation of the *Mayan-Vinic* (True Person) cooperative among *Las Abejas* members. Most of the adherents to the cooperative are displaced families. As of December 1999, about 801 men with their spouses and six single women were registered members of this cooperative that deals with the production and commercialization of coffee. The director of *Maya-Vinic* explains:

With the constitution of this cooperative our effort is to bypass the *coyotes* (mediators) of Pantelhó, who generally pay very little to the producers. Until now coffee producers did not have much alternative than to sell their products at prices sometimes not even sufficient to cover their expenses. With the cooperative, nobody is discriminated and each family can receive an equal distribution of the money. Thanks to the many international connections we had after the Acteal massacre, we can sell our products overseas with the help of international NGOs... We produce our coffee biologically. This goes in accord with modern ecological sensitivity and with our ways of respecting mother earth. To avoid parasites we use a mix of soap, chili and garlic dissolved in tobacco water. With that we sprinkle our coffee plants and we avoid most of the parasites. The coop is also part of our spiritual ways of relating to the land. Before harvesting we have an important ceremony that gives thanks for the products and asks permission to harvest mother earth ... For the planting of coffee, which can

last even 40 years, we have only one ceremony, but for the corn we have 5 ceremonies from seeding to harvesting...(Interview 16).

Recently, *Las Abejas* was invited to a conference called *Voces de la Tierra* (Voices of the Earth) organized by the group *Amigos de Chiapas*, in Trento, Italy. Unfortunately, *Las Abejas* could not send any participants because the government did not grant them the necessary documentation. However, this was the occasion for *Las Abejas* to reflect on the theme of the earth and they sent a reflection to the conference. In their writing it is evident how the terms 'earth' and 'land' are invested with the same meaning of mother.

In this encounter we are called to recognize that our Mother Earth is the life for us and for the humanity. It is the base of our life, from her we eat, in her we live, to be in her is to be in our mother's breast. If we are without earth we cannot live. If we defend our life, we defend the mother earth and we defend our rights, as well as the freedom to live in her. It is the earth that gave us life and to be far from her makes us feel outside of life. Like now that we are displaced because of the war that the Mexican government makes against the peasants and indigenous. We feel that it is in our mother earth where our culture is born. For that reason we fight to defend our culture, our ethnicity, our color. As it is our identity, we fight to defend our cultural patrimony that we want to revive totally like people.¹⁸

¹⁸ Las Abejas' reflections presented at the *Voces de la Tierra* conference in Trento, Italy. April 8, 2000.

We Resist Because of Our Dignity!

Las Abejas agree with the neozapatista movement that the ongoing rebellion is not just for land. The demands formulated by the EZLN in 1994 go far beyond those of the 1910 revolution lead by Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa. Along with the request for the recognition for indigenous autonomy, participation and ethnic distinctiveness, they demand the respect of their dignity (Proceso [Mexico City], 10 January 1994). Subcomandante Marcos announced that their rebellion was initiated on the eve of the implementation of NAFTA as a warning to the Mexican government not to leave indigenous people out of decisions that threaten their very survival as distinct ethnic groups (Ibid). The following text shows how “dignity” clarifies the resurgence of rebellion among the indigenous people of Chiapas.

The suffering that unified us made us speak, and we recognized that in our worlds, there was truth; we knew that not only pain and suffering lived in our tongue; we recognized that there is hope still in our hearts. We spoke to ourselves, we looked inside ourselves and we looked at our history: we saw our most ancient fathers suffering and struggling, we saw our grandfathers struggling, we saw our grandfathers with fury in their hands, we saw that everything had not been taken away from us, that we had the most valuable, that which made us live, that which made us rise above plants and animals, that which made the stone beneath our feet, and we saw brothers, that all that we had was dignity, and we saw how great was the shame of having forgotten it, and we saw that dignity was good for men to be men again, and dignity returned to live in our hearts, and we were new again, and the dead, our dead, saw that we were new again and they called us again, to dignity, to struggle.¹⁹

The Mexican Revolutionary motto *Tierra y Libertad* (land and freedom), common among rebellious Zapatistas, is often substituted among *Las Abejas* people with *Paz con Justicia y*

¹⁹ Excerpt from the 1994 letter sent by the ruling body of the EZLN, the Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena (CCRI) addressed to another indigenous organization called Consejo 500 Años de Resistencia Indígena (The Council of 500 Years of Indigenous Resistance). The same passage was quoted by Comandante Ramona when she represented the EZLN in the Second Indigenous Congress in Mexico City on February 16, 1997 (see Hallway and Peláez 1998: 159).

Dignidad (peace with justice and dignity). This is an expression of their most intimate and crucial aspects of their identity and existence as indigenous people. At the beginning of the Zapatista uprising in 1994, dignity was also recognized as an essential dimension along with land and freedom. The combination of land with dignity is at the core of the Zapatista rebellion. But for the indigenous people of Chiapas, dignity, like land, is more than a political program. Dignity speaks of the indigenous' religious, cultural and social identity. Dignity is often claimed to be a central concept in EZLN revolutionary beliefs (Le Bot 1997). However, it is rarely stated how this concept originated with the Mayan indigenous identity and later influenced the EZLN's ideology and language. Dignity was probably not part of the conceptual baggage of the revolutionaries who went to live with the indigenous people of Chiapas at the end of the 1960s.²⁰ Instead, the centrality of dignity in today's Chiapas resistance resulted from the integration of revolutionaries with indigenous communities. John Holloway (1998, 161) recognizes how it was probably Mayan indigenous wisdom, with its communitarian and sacred view of relationships that influenced the EZLN and eventually inspired a new way of conceptualizing rebellion and revolution. Subcomandante Marcos and the other non-indigenous members of the EZLN have recognized this.

More than the redistribution of wealth or the expropriation of the means of production, revolution starts the possibility that human beings can have a space of dignity. Dignity begins to be a very strong word. It is not our contribution, it is not the contribution of the urban element, it is the communities who contributed it. So that revolution should be the assurance that dignity be realized and respected (Le Bot 1997, 146).

²⁰ The concept of "dignity," exceptionally considered by Ernst Bloch (1961), was probably unknown or considered irrelevant in the Marxist, Maoist studies done by those former UNAM students who escaped the 1968 repression and later engaged in the organization of an underground guerrilla movements in the Lacandon Jungle (see Holloway and Peláez 1998 and Díaz 1998).

Indeed the 1994 Zapatista uprising represents the assertion of indigenous dignity (Holloway 1998, 166). But indigenous claims for dignity clearly emerged since October 12, 1992. On the occasion of the 500th anniversary of Columbus's discovery, about 10,000 indigenous people marched through the streets of San Cristóbal de Las Casas denouncing 500 years of oppression and claiming the recognition of their cultural and indigenous rights. Unknown to many, most of the participants were already members of the Zapatista movement that occupied San Cristóbal 14 months later (Díaz 1998; Le Bot 1997). On that day in October, they knocked down the statue of Spanish conqueror Diego de Mazariegos next to the Santo Domingo Church. Indigenous people, whose dignity and humanity was never recognized or respected by the *Coletos* (*Ladino*) town of San Cristóbal, were now symbolically destroying the icon of 500 years of domination and oppression. Well-known photographer Antonio Turok's (1998) photograph captures the powerful messages that this action symbolizes for the Mayan indigenous communities of Chiapas. To the press and international organizations, that gesture represented the shift from passive resistance into open rebellion. Yet for the indigenous people of the Highlands, it showed Chiapas and Mexico how cultural and human dignity was vital to their existence.

The indigenous concept of dignity is something often misunderstood by non-indigenous people. Dignity is something intimately connected to the indigenous way of life and their religious and communitarian worldviews. But it is also linked to their urgent need for justice, peace and the recognition of their rights. Dignity is so central to their rebellion and resistance that "when dignity is respected, everything else finds harmony" (Holloway 1998, 172). Unfortunately, the government's rationalized and organizational worldview tried to categorize "dignity" without understanding the life and struggle of the indigenous people. After 508 years of relations between the *Ladino* and indigenous populations, these two different views of dignity never found

understanding and dialogue. In the words of EZLN Comandante Tacho, the two can never find understanding when the government attempts to pacify their inherent human, cultural and vital dimensions.

They told us that they are studying what dignity means. They are consulting and making studies on dignity... They asked us to tell them what we mean when we say dignity. We told them to continue their research. This makes us laugh and we laugh in front of them because although they have big centers of research and big studies in school, it's a shame that they don't understand what we mean. We told them that if we sign the peace accords, then we will tell them at the end what dignity means for us (*La Jornada* [Mexico City], 10 June 1995).

The difficulty in understanding what dignity means for the indigenous community is not just a cultural problem. Real understanding requires a different method. As in other indigenous populations, among Tzotziles and other Mayan populations, rarely does learning occur in a formal setting where a teacher instructs a student. One learns by living next to one another. The child learns from the father and the mother, by staying next to them, observing their example and paying attention to their behaviors. This is expressed by two indigenous central principles assumed by the EZLN. The first, *perguntando caminamos* (asking while we walk) is the way the indigenous communities always associate 'learning' with life, not just schooling. Everyone learns by listening, observing and asking instead of just lecturing.

The second central concept is *mandar obedeciendo* (to command by obeying), an essential organizational principle that guarantees respect for the dignity of the whole community. The authority given to the person in power is not to dominate but to serve the community. Authority is not delegated to make decisions 'for' the community but 'with' the community. The common practice among indigenous communities and organizations is to discuss important decisions together until a consensus is reached. It is also common to recall persons in a position of authority when they do not satisfy the community.

The struggle for the recognition of indigenous dignity is a form of resistance against non-definition. The emphasis on dignity, often remarked by *Las Abejas* and other organizations of the neozapatista movement of Chiapas, brings to light the centrality of identity. Where there is oppression, racism, marginalization and violations of human rights, indigenous and cultural dignity is lost. Dignity is linked primarily to cultural, but also religious, political and economic aspects of identity. Restricting dignity to a general abstraction such as 'All humans have dignity' or even 'All indigenous people have the right to dignity' without contextualizing the wholeness of a human person is meaningless. However, also restricting dignity to only what threatens one's respect of dignity without seeing the positive contribution that indigenous dignity offers to all humanity is also inadequate. Therefore, the concept of dignity, as exemplified by the indigenous struggle of Chiapas, only gains force if understood in its context of identity and resistance. Because oppression is always a negation of dignity, domination always implies a process or re-dignifying and re-identifying through open or hidden forms of resistance (Scott 1990; Wink 1992). The lack of respect of indigenous dignity is manifested in the ongoing economic, political and cultural oppression of Chiapas indigenous communities in resistance. On the contrary, a true respect of *Las Abejas* indigenous dignity rests in our appreciation of the cultural, religious, political, and human rights qualities of their collective identity.

The Tzotziles of *Las Abejas* and other indigenous groups are victims of a double marginalization based on class and race. By challenging indigenous communal land systems, neoliberal reforms seriously endanger indigenous economic subsistence and racial existence. This is explained by their constant reference to land and dignity at the root of their identity and struggle of resistance. *Las Abejas* consider respectful and dignified relations to their land, in their communities, and across ethnicities, as a prerequisite for peace in Chiapas. Land and dignity also

synthesize the prerequisites for the construction of identity and resistance. Before entering into the cultural, religious, political and human rights specific frameworks of identity formation, we will first consider, in the following two chapters, the formation and evolution of *Las Abejas* as an organization and the juxtaposed meanings of the Acteal massacre.

CHAPTER 4:
LAS ABEJAS AND THE ACTEAL MASSACRE

The 1992 Formation of *Las Abejas*

The *Sociedad Civil Las Abejas*²¹ emerged as a collective response to land conflict and political injustice. On December 9, 1992, numerous representatives from 22 communities gathered in Tzajalchen, in the municipality of Chenalhó and formed a coalition to defend a woman's rights to own land. Thirty days earlier, in the nearby community of Tzanembolom, Agustín Hernandez Lopez did not want to share the 120 hectares of inherited land with his two sisters, Catarina and Maria. His argument was that "as women" they did not have any rights to land (Hidalgo 1998, 54). As is typical with disagreements in this indigenous community, the community gathered to examine the quarrel. The Tzanembolom community decided to divide the land into three equal parts, giving justice and equal rights to all the siblings. Because about 60 hectares were not registered with the certificate of Agrarian Rights, the community suggested partitioning the remaining land. The brother, in disagreement with the community decision, handed the unregistered land over to some inhabitants of the Yibeljoj, Las Delicias, and Yabteclum communities asking for their support. Then, Agustín Hernandez Lopez and this group decided to kidnap the two sisters along with their children, forcing them to sign documents

²¹ In Mexico, the Spanish term "sociedad civil" refers broadly to citizen movements and groups organized around specific needs or interests outside governmental structures. *Las Abejas* is called "sociedad civil" identifying the organization as a civil association, and distinguishing it from the EZLN, the armed group of the Zapatistas. For more details see Chapter 7.

and renounce their land.²² In response, several representatives from 22 communities organized in support of the two sisters and defended their communities from possible attacks (Barry 1995).

Thinking about how to call themselves, they chose the image of Abejas (bees) to “symbolize [their] collective identity and actions directed toward the defense of the rights of the little ones and toward sharing the fruit of [their] work equally with everyone” (Interview 26). At the head of the organization there is the Queen, which is identified by some with Nuestra Señora de Cancuc, an indigenous face of the Virgin Mary, similar to the Madonna of Guadalupe (Interview 25).²³ The image of the bees makes them all equal as “workers for the kingdom of justice, love and peace” (Interview 26). Also, as bees use antennas for communication, *Las Abejas* “make an effort to keep the whole community well informed and in network with each other” (Interview 35) Like bees, they work as a collective movement. And like the little insects that fly around a variety of flowers, their religious worldview is inclusive of Catholic, Presbyterian and Mayan traditionalist identities (ibid). They explain the choice of their name in this way:

We called ourselves *Las Abejas* [bees] because we are a multitude able to mobilize together, as we did in Tzajalchen on December 9, 1992. Like the bees we want to build our houses together, to collectively work and enjoy the fruit of our work. We want to produce ‘honey’ but also to share with everyone who needs it. We are all together like the bees, in the same house, and we walk with our Queen, which is the Kingdom of God. We know that, like the little bees, the work is slow but the result is sure because it is collective (Interview 21).

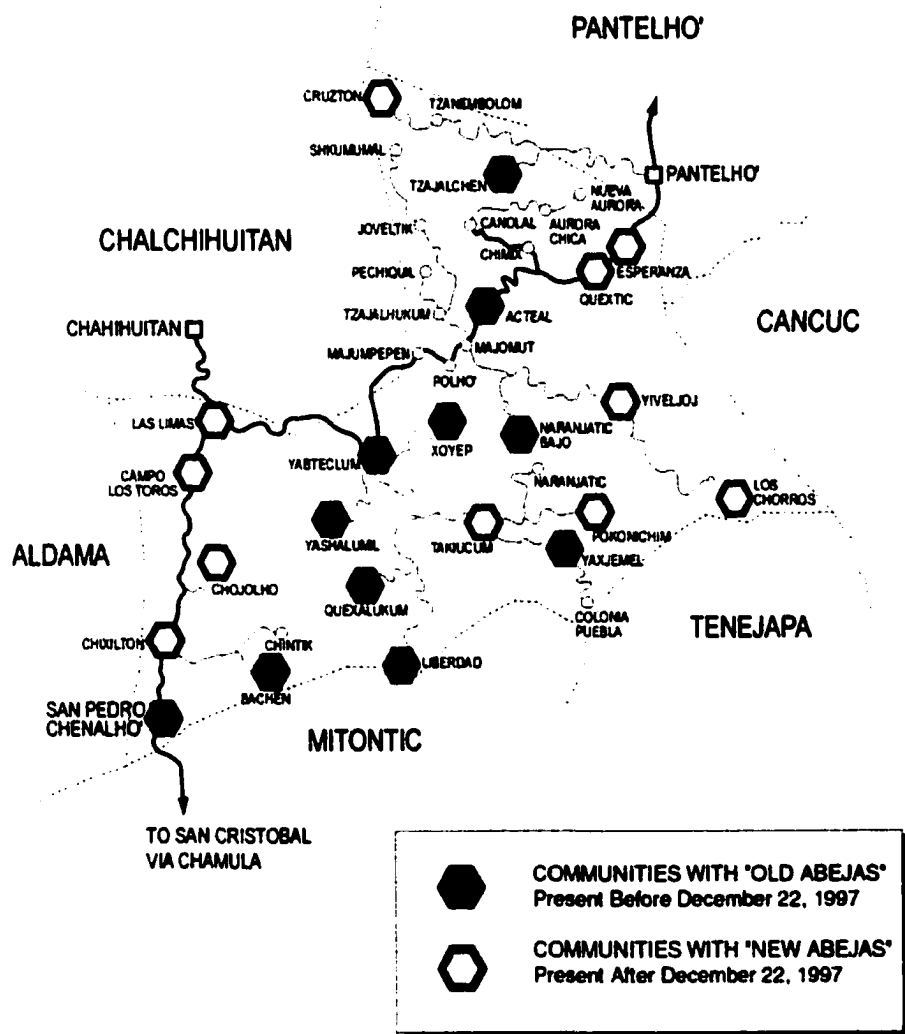
Some other members identify their iconographic image of the bees with their political intent and active resistance against the government: “The bee is a very small insect that is able to

²² CIACH, *Resumen Informativo* 21 (Noviembre 1997): 3.

²³ This dimension of inculturated faith has always given the Tzotzil-Mayan descendants strength to resist and rebel (see: Gosner 1992).

move a sleeping cow when it pricks. Our struggle is like a bee that pricks, this is our resistance, but it's non-violent. We do this because we need to defend who we are... we need to live as people" (Interview 22).

Map 4.1: *Las Abejas* Communities in Chenalhó



(Source: *Mesa Directiva*, December 1999)

Since their formation, *Las Abejas* have experienced persecution and assassinations. At

the end of a constitutional meeting in Tzajalchen, the newly formed organization was assaulted by the coalition of people directed by Agustín Hernández López. Three people were seriously wounded and one, Vicente Gutiérrez Hernández, the municipal agent of Tzajalchen, was killed. The inhabitants of the community contacted the municipal authorities in the Chenalhó *cabecera* by radio and asked them to help transport the wounded to the hospital in San Cristóbal. The PRI affiliated municipal president, Antonio Pérez Vázquez, responded to the community in the middle of the night, asking them to bring the bodies down to Canolal where an ambulance would transport the wounded people. Those who presided over the meeting in Tzajalchen managed to transport the victims of the assault down the mountain to meet the ambulance on the main road. But when they arrived, the municipal president, having a list of names of the organizers of the meeting in Tzajalchen, ordered the arrest of those leaders who were also carrying the injured people. Felipe Hernández Pérez, Mariano Pérez Vázquez, Sebastián Pérez Vázquez and Manuel Pérez Gutiérrez were detained without order of apprehension and transported to the jail of San Cristóbal de Las Casas (Hidalgo 1998, 58).

In addition to this clearly unjust action by the authorities, tension in the municipality of Chenalhó increased as State's Attorney General Rafael Gonzales Lastra informed them that the five people detained were responsible for the attack in Tzajalchen along with the other 28 leaders of the newly organized *Las Abejas*. Twenty-eight new orders of apprehension were issued against them while the community of Tzajalchen was threatened with new intimidation against the spouses of the wounded people. This included Catarina Arias Pérez who was raped while being seven months pregnant (*ibid.*).

On December 21, 1992, exasperated by this unsustainable situation of injustice and terror, approximately 1,500 indigenous participated in a protest march from Yabteclum to San

Cristóbal de Las Casas (Interview 26). For the first time, inhabitants and tourists of San Cristóbal saw the nonviolent protest of an indigenous organization called “*Las Abejas*.” For five days, *Las Abejas* exhibited banners in the cathedral square explaining the injustice of the government and asked for the liberation of their companions. They marched for five days from the cathedral to the jail until the sixth day when numerous indigenous from the communities of Simojovel, San Andrés Larrainzar, Chalchiuitán and Pantelhó joined their efforts. Observing the increasing attention, the state’s attorney preferred to liberate the five incarcerated people “due to the disappearance of evidence” (Hidalgo 1998, 59). In the following years, *Las Abejas* continued organizing as the opposition between Priistas and Zapatistas emerged.

On the Violent Path to Acteal

With the April 1996 constitution of the Zapatista *base de apoyo* (support base) of Polhó, tensions significantly heightened in the Chenalhó municipality.²⁴ Polhó is one of the EZLN autonomous communities characterized by its own government. Their goal was to solidify the right of indigenous autonomy, stipulated in the 1996 San Andres Peace Accords (Collier 2000; García-Aguilar 1999; Mattiace 1998; Rivera Gomez 1999). In the enthusiastic climate created by the signed accords between the EZLN and the Mexican government, several other indigenous autonomous communities were created throughout the northeast of Chiapas. The government however, never recognized the legitimacy of such communities and tried, on a few occasions, to dismantle their self-government (Hirales 1998, 20-23). Two months after the signing of the San

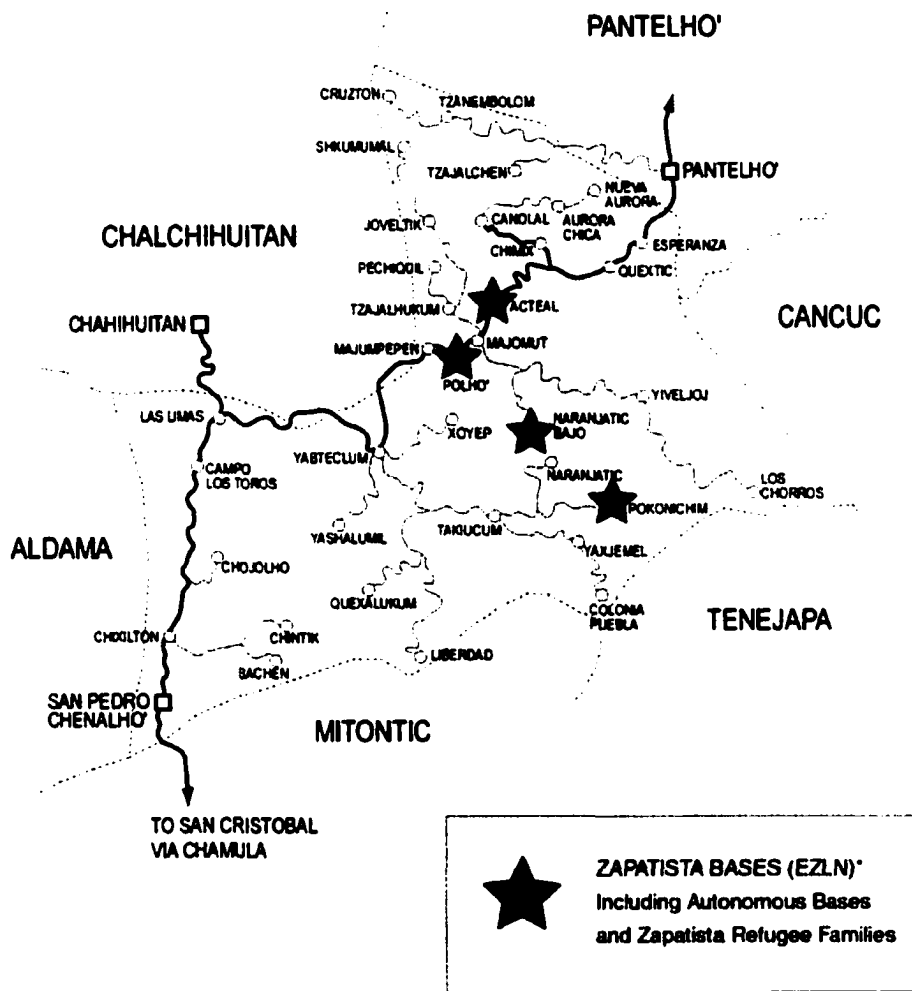
²⁴ My description of the events preceding Acteal is based on numerous interviews and on the documentations published of the CDHFBC (1998a; 1998b) and the Mexican government represented by the Comisión de Concordia y Pacificación (COCOPA) and the Procuraduría General de la República (PGR). The work of Hirales (1998) served as reference for the government’s interpretations and the one of Fabela (2000) as historical reference.

Andrés Accords, the autonomous municipality of Polhó was established, comprising 42 of the 97 communities in Chenalhó.²⁵ Polhó is also in coordination with 11 other autonomous municipalities present in the Highlands and remains in contact with others in the Lacandon and northern regions of Chiapas.

Since the beginning of the EZLN rebellion in 1994, *Las Abejas* was pressured by both PRI communities and the autonomous municipality of Polhó to join their sides. The support of a very large organization like *Las Abejas* was important for both sides of the conflict (Olivera Bustamante 1998, 114-124; Hernández Navarro 1998, 7-10). The pressures began to intensify with the Zapatista invasion of the *banco de arena* (sand mine) in Majomut. The *banco de arena* is small-scale gravel and sand mine visible on the left side of the road between Polhó and Acteal. The revenue coming from the sale of gravel and sand used to pave the road from Chenalhó to Pantelhó benefited a PRI peasant organization supported by the government until August 16, 1996. On that day, the autonomous municipality declared this precious piece of land under EZLN jurisdiction. The *autónomos* earned money from it until March 1997, when the paving project of the road was completed (Hirales 1998, 25). Clearly, the invasion of the *banco de arena* provoked the irritation of *Priistas* from Majomut and Pechequil and *Cardenistas* from Los Chorros, who previously benefited from it.

²⁵ The number refers to the communities present in Chenalhó before the re-municipalization of Chiapas actuated by Governor Albores Guillen in 1999.

Map 4.2: Zapatista Presence in Chenalhó

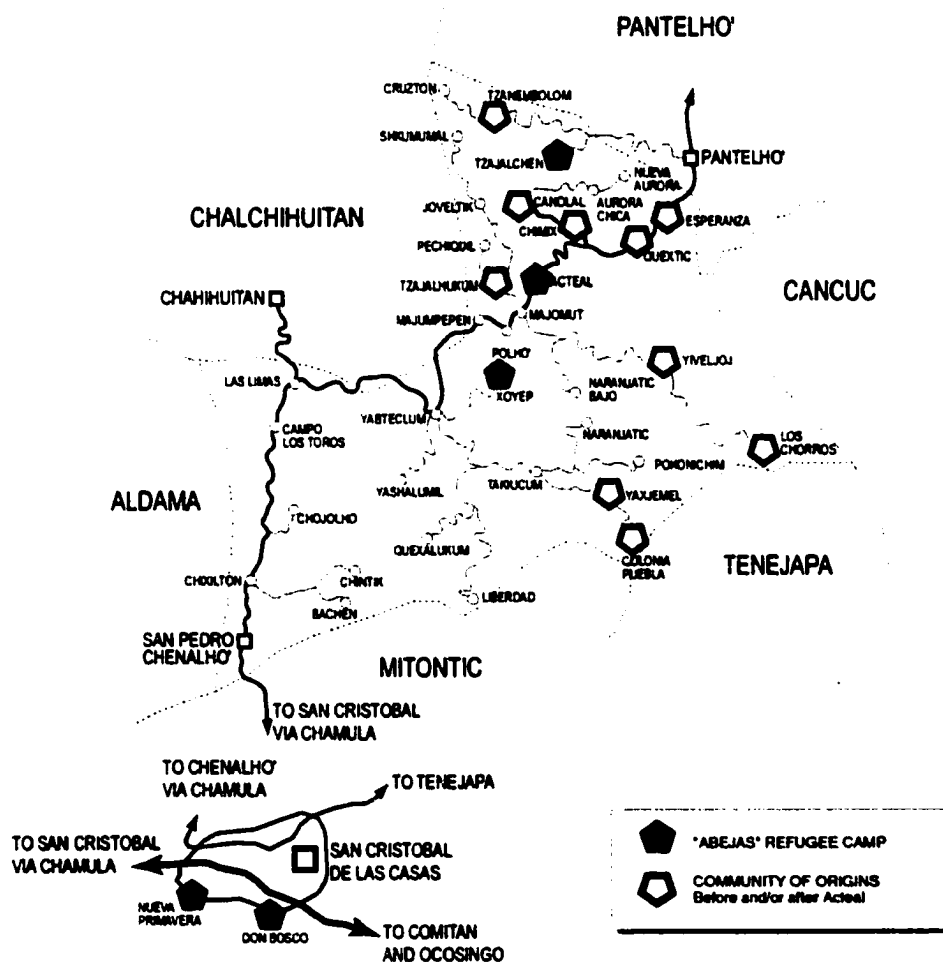


(Source: *Mesa Directiva*, December 1999)

On September 23, 1996, annoyed with continuous threats and pressures from the Priistas, *Las Abejas* co-signed a letter from the Zapatista Autonomous Council of Polhó to the Substitute Governor of Chiapas, Julio César Ruiz Ferro. From then on, most PRI communities linked *Las Abejas* with the *auténomos* Zapatistas, and indiscriminately targeted them in a series of

ambushes, reprisals and murders that eventually culminated in the Acteal massacre. In fact, during the time between September 1996 and December 1997 eighteen people affiliated with the PRI and twenty-four people affiliated with the Zapatistas were killed in the Chenalhó municipality. Several others were wounded. (Interviews, 42; 43; 65; 66).

Map 4.3: *Las Abejas* Displaced Communities



(Source: *Mesa Directiva*, December 1999)

Las Abejas leaders attempted to establish dialogue between the two sides on numerous

occasions (Hirales 1998). However, the pacts emerging from these dialogues were soon broken as both sides began expelling Zapatista or Priista families from their communities. Most of the displaced families of *Las Abejas* who found refuge in Acteal were expelled from the communities of La Esperanza, Tzajalucum and Queshtic. A few families arrived in Acteal the nights of December 17 and 18 due to the escalating violence and recurrent shooting in their communities.

December 22, 1997: Bury my Heart in Acteal

On the morning of December 22, about 250 Abejas were in the refugee camp of Acteal. They were in and around the chapel, an improvised construction made of a few wooden boards for the roof and walls and a dirt floor about 50 feet below road level. Like other mornings, representatives of the displaced families and their catechists along with a few other leaders of *Las Abejas* originally from Acteal, met in the Catholic chapel at 6AM to share the latest news, organize, pray and sing. Most of them were women and children already exhausted from their displacement and the tense circumstances. Catechist Alonzo Vázquez asked those who were participating in the fast for peace in Chenalhó to break the fast. Most of *Las Abejas* continued with their prayers in the Catholic chapel until 10:30AM, when shots were heard. According to testimonies, the Zapatista autonomous community in Acteal, conscious of the immediate threat against their group, managed to rapidly escape from their side of Acteal (Interview 66).

According to various testimonies, the first aggressors arrived in Acteal at 8:00AM transported by *Policia de Seguridad Pública* pickups (Public Security Police) (CDHFBC 1998b, 31). They were PRI militants from the Chenalhó communities of Quextic, La Esperanza, Los Chorros, Puebla, Chimix and Canolal (La Jornada [Mexico City], 24 December 1997 and

CDHFBC 1998b, 7).²⁶ According to several testimonies, the red *bandanas* on the heads and rifles of the people who participated in the shooting proved that the armed group belonged to the paramilitary group called *Máscara Roja* (Red Mask) (cf. Hiraes 1998,37; Huerta Patiño and Boldrini 1998, 93).

From the numerous testimonies collected by the CDHFBC, we know that some of the aggressors previously met in Pechiquil, while others went inside the Presbyterian temple of *Acteal Alto* and asked for blessings and protection (CDHFBC 1998b). The aggressors, numbering between thirty and forty, finished meeting and organizing around 9:30 in the morning at the side of the road next to *Acteal*. After positioning themselves on the road, they waited for the other two groups of aggressors arriving from Tzajalucum and Quextic (CDHFBC 1998b, 45). At 10:30, shots began as the aggressors advanced toward *Acteal Centro*. Some testimonies recall that they did not find anyone at this point. But others remember that they attacked a group of unarmed women and children of *Las Abejas* as they were trying to hide in a ravine in the valley between *Acteal Centro* and *Acteal Bajo* (CDHFBC 1998c). Was this unarmed group of women and children trying to protect the others? This could be possible considering that one of the nonviolent tactics used by women of *Las Abejas* and the *autónomos* Zapatistas is to make a human chain and try to protect the others (Hernández Castillo 1998).

Survivors recall the deliberate and violent actions of the massacre. The shooting continued undisturbed for over six hours. Even after experiencing the previous Priistas threats, *Las Abejas* in *Acteal* were not prepared for an attack of this proportion. As a survivor recalls:

I was with my companions in the church because we have our camp of peace there... We were calm and we couldn't imagine that somebody was planning to

²⁶ For more detailed reports see the Judicial Reports, 8/98, 15/98, 46/98.

do something so horrible against us... We gathered in the church to discuss and make arrangements for the coordination of the group. We discussed our liturgies and prayers to God for the solution of the problem in our municipality... But around eleven in the morning of the 22nd of December, without knowing anything, we heard a great quantity of bullets that were going from the lower part of the church and the shots were coming closer to the church... There was a frightening rain of bullets (CDHFBC 1998c)

At 11:30AM, the camp of *Acteal Centro* was already surrounded on three sides by approximately 60 armed gunmen, most carrying AK-47s. Their faces were partially covered by red bandanas. The attack started from below with the first shots fired at the makeshift chapel used by *Las Abejas* displaced people. In the turmoil that followed, men, women and children tried to escape. Some found refuge in the thick foliage or the narrow valleys that surrounded Acteal's steep mountainous terrain. A large group clustered together against a furrow with no possibility of escape. The killers had time to position themselves and fire at will (Nadal 1998).

The bullets were coming like water drops. There was a small place to hide down there. We went there, but we could see dirt flying where the shots were hitting the ground. The children were making sounds and everyone was crying. It was then that they heard us and knew where we were trying to hide. It was then that they started to shoot at us and they killed almost all of us. I escaped because I hid under a ravine with my little brother (CDHFBC 1998c).

The survivors, most of whom were covered by the bodies and blood of the dead, heard screams of terror and witnessed the murderers use their machetes to finish off the wounded and mutilate the dead (CDHFBC 1998c). A woman survivor recalls seeing "a woman's head broken, probably by a high caliber bullet" (Huerta Patiño and Boldrini 1998, 11) She also saw "a girl with half of her body wounded by a machete" (Ibid.) Only a few children, hidden and protected by their parents and relatives' corpses, survived. The shooting continued until 4:30PM, when the gunmen shot the last bullets into the air as they drove away in their pick up trucks.

The assault resulted in forty-five people killed, all members of *Las Abejas* organization.

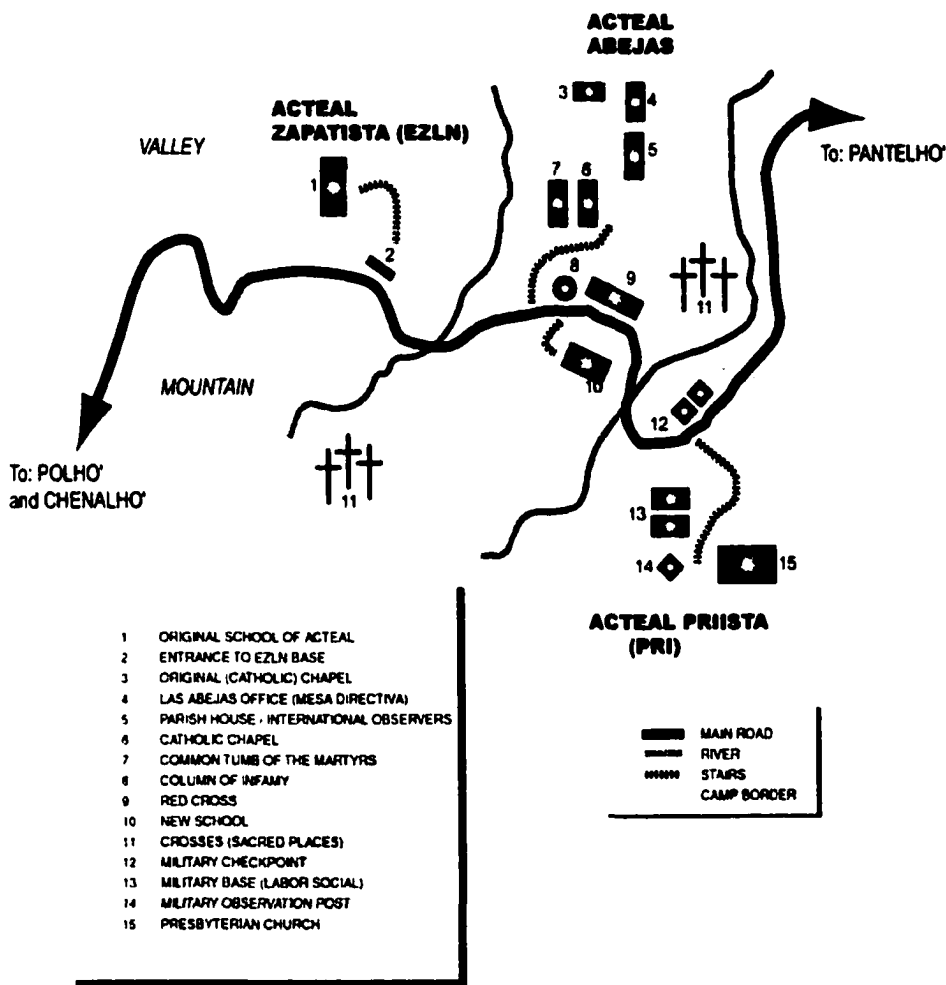
Among them were twenty-one women, fifteen children and nine men. In addition, about twenty-five people were wounded, and nine of them seriously. "Some of the survivors had wounds caused by bullets that had been doctored to explode on impact" (Nadal 1998).

The Public Security Police, stationed very close to Acteal, heard the shootings but failed to investigate or intervene. They entered the community of Acteal only at 5:00PM, more than six hours after the PRI militants began their attack, and more than five hours after the CONAI had called to warn them about what was happening. The government officials had an order from the Governor of Chiapas to remove the corpses and transport them to Tuxtla Gutiérrez for an autopsy. Ignoring *Las Abejas'* protests, the Police changed and disturbed the massacre scene.²⁷ Supported by representatives of CDHFBC and the diocese, *Las Abejas* also strongly objected when the police piled the corpses in a truck and drove them away before the Justice Department officials arrived. Government officials justified their actions saying that it was necessary to perform autopsies and the bodies had to be transported to the capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez. It was never clarified, however, who ordered this.²⁸ As a result of the autopsies, Mexican Attorney General (PGR) declared that the deaths of Acteal had been the result of either a family conflict or perhaps community strife. According to the CDHFBC, this interpretation was later used to justify the military buildup that followed in the municipality of Chenalhó and in other Zapatista areas of Chiapas (CDHFBC 1998b). Later, the bodies were returned to Acteal, where a funeral and a burial ceremony was presided over by Bishop Samuel Ruiz.

²⁷ See: CDHFBC. "Events that Show the Complacency and Complicity of Governmental Authorities." Available in the Internet: <http://www.laneta.apc.org/cdhbcasas/chenalho/comp-eng.htm>

²⁸ See: CDHFBC and CDHMAP. "Reporte para la comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos (CIDH) sobre los sucesos de Chenalhó, Chiapas, Mexico." Washington DC: February 1998. Available in the Internet: <http://www.laneta.apc.org/cdhbcasas/cidh.htm>

Map 4.4: The Three Acteals



(Source: Fieldwork Observations, December 1999)

The Three Acteals: A Paradigm for *Las Abejas* Identity

Acteal, though quite a small village, is subdivided into three parts representing *Las Abejas*' mediating role in the conflicting context of Chenalhó. The part of Acteal inhabited by *Las Abejas* is located between Acteal Zapatista and Acteal Priista. *Las Abejas* families are a buffer

between the two contending parties. *Las Abejas* has identified this geographical position as a reflection of their mission of intermediation and identity as nonviolent peacemakers.

Unfortunately, their nonviolent position was always misinterpreted from both sides of the conflict. In fact, between 1994 and 1998 they were pressured and harassed from both Zapatista and Priista sides. The Acteal massacre confirmed to *Las Abejas* how being in the middle and maintaining their identity and convictions as pacifists would require paying with their own lives.

Going toward Pantelhó we first encounter *Acteal Bajo* (Low Acteal) on the left side of the road. Zapatista families currently occupy this part of Acteal. As we enter this area, we notice the Zapatista murals and the cordoned-off area where the women, children and men make a human line to protect their community. One has to speak with an official of the campo in order to be granted permission to enter. The original school and the basketball court are located in this part of Acteal. To the left of the road, down steep steps, is a small and poorly made *hermita* (chapel) originally used by *Las Abejas* for their prayers and meetings.²⁹ This is *Acteal Centro* (Central Acteal) that was occupied, until December 27, 1997, by 250 or 400 displaced people all belonging to the organization *Las Abejas*.³⁰ Nearby there are five crosses, often used by Tzotziles to identify their sacred places. From the road it is easy to see all the activity of Acteal Centro because, although surrounded by ravines, it is far below the road.

A few more wooden houses are located along the road that continues until we encounter *Acteal Alto* (High Acteal). Presbyterian families belonging to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) occupy this side of Acteal. The Presbyterian temple is visible from afar for it is

²⁹ In the Highlands, Catholics are the only religious group who refer to their chapels as *hermitas*. Presbyterians refer to their places of worship as *templos* (temples). All other churches represented refer to theirs as *capillas* (chapels).

³⁰ The number varies according to the different testimonies.

located up the hill on the right side of the road. Today this side of Acteal is completely occupied by a military camp that has surrounded even the temple with observation stations.

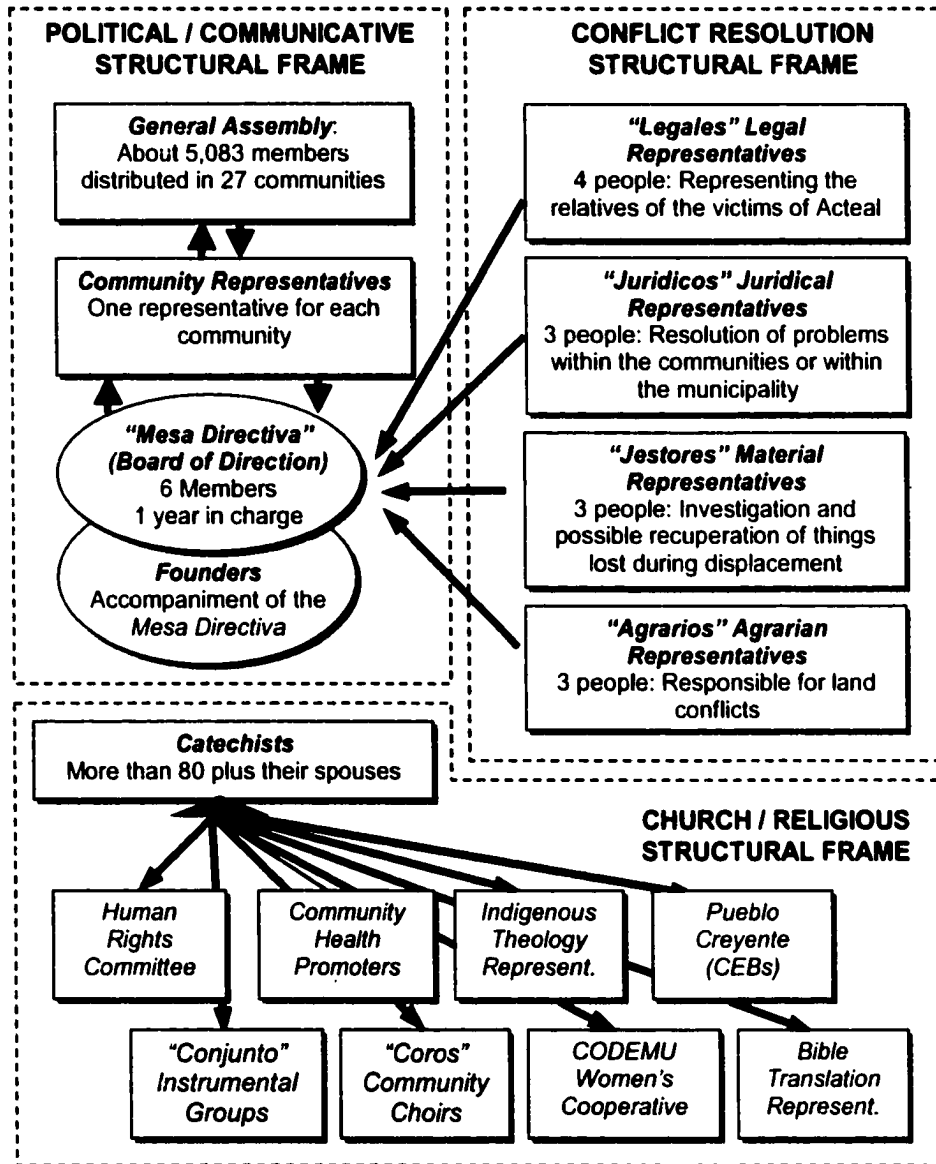
Las Abejas' directive board lives and meets regularly in Acteal Abejas. Their location recognizes the centrality of the Acteal massacre on the life, structure and identity of *Las Abejas*.

Developing a Syncretic Organization

Since the Acteal massacre, *Las Abejas'* structural organization has evolved quite rapidly. *Las Abejas* was suddenly challenged to respond to the new needs of communication with government authorities, human rights organizations, media and numerous international delegations. *Las Abejas* responded by incorporating religious, juridical and political structural frames to implement internal and external communication, assuring efficiency and community decision-making power. The structural configuration of the organization is still evolving to better respond to the different needs. Nevertheless, *Las Abejas'* ability to cluster cultural, religious, political and juridical (human rights) frames even at the level of organizational structure supports my thesis of syncretic processes.

They constituted new commissions to dialogue with government authorities following the Acteal massacre. Other commissions were created around issues related to displacement, land and community conflicts. As needs multiplied, *Las Abejas* was able to successfully maintain their communicative structure between the leadership and the communities. They managed this thanks to the work of pre-existing well-trained church leaders, mainly catechists, and by forming new leadership with the support of the diocese and NGOs.

Figure 4.1: *Las Abejas* 'Syncretic' Organizational Frames



(Source: Fieldnotes and Various Interviews, December 1999)

The after-Acteal situation urgently required leaders with a political preparation and organizational skills along with knowledge of Spanish and eventually English. *Las Abejas* leadership needed to have good communication skills to represent the organization before the

many international and diplomatic visitors. A formation of local leaders with these pre-requisites is a difficult task that requires time and attentive accompaniment. The new leadership, for example, has found itself overwhelmed by the needs and received help from the previous administration, mostly formed by founders of the organization. An Abeja catechist explains the role of former leaders as an expression of community support. In his words:

Las Abejas is a bit different from traditional organizations. For example its leaders need to be able to speak Spanish and be capable of speaking clearly and competently to other group representatives and visitors. Some people of this current *Mesa* are not at this level. They do not have many capacities to sustain the amount of contacts and demands for work after the massacre. Some of our leaders do not speak Spanish and are not sufficiently prepared to do political and economic analysis. So, if former leaders accompany them in certain jobs it is an expression of community support. Some leaders of Tzajalchen, who started the movement, know how to struggle politically. The problem is that too many in our communities remain quiet. This is a sign that we need more consciousness raising work at the base (Interview 21).

According to local NGO workers, *Las Abejas'* too rapid structural growth has generated "an inadequate political preparation that at times make the movement politically naïve" (Interview 34). Nevertheless, *Las Abejas*, since its formation in 1992, began clarifying their political position separating themselves from *Solidaridad Campesina Magisterial* (SOCAMA). The original structure of the organization with the 22 founding communities immediately broke their alliance with the *Frente Cardenista de Reconstrucción Nacional* or Cardenista Party (FCRN). Their efforts to distinguish their organization from government authorities' abuse of power found new strength with the 1994 emergence of the EZLN. Since then, they clearly identified with the Zapatista demands and confirmed their position as mediators between PRI and EZLN communities. However, with the intensification of complex relations between local, national and international political actors at play in the Chiapas struggle, *Las Abejas* had to find close support and collaboration with numerous NGOs to implement their political and organizational capacity.

As a former CONAI member comments:

Las Abejas movement has grown rapidly. Similar to a street child, it's a fast learner. Although young in its constitution, it's a complex movement that better represents the complexity of the struggle here in Chiapas that is beyond the PRI - EZLN struggle and it's extended beyond the geographical boundaries of Chiapas... Their demands are more ample than those of the Zapatistas. That is why their resistance is even more symbolic of the resistance of the indigenous people. They are however, a bit ingenuous politically and it is good they refer to the EZLN and the diocese. They are growing fast, though, as I was saying before, thanks also to the support and formation of local, national and international NGOs (Interview 17).

Other non-governmental organizations recognize in the rapid growth of *Las Abejas* organization the risk of *caciquismo*,³¹ as only a few leaders are able to respond to the needs (Interview 17). However, most pastoral workers of the diocese do not share this critique of *caciquismo* for *Las Abejas*. Based on their long experience and knowledge of the Tzotzil culture and traditions, they agree that, before judging the leadership organization of an indigenous group or movement, we need to refer to the meaning of 'cargo' in their culture. Numerous anthropological studies among the Tzotzil indigenous people of the Highlands have recognized the religious-political cargo system as a service to the community (Nash 1958; Cancian 1965). In the Tzotzil culture, a person who is in a position of leadership in the community never leaves that status but he switches to another similar *cargo* (service of leadership) (Interview 50). However, the public service entailed by leadership places that person in a position to be observed by the whole community who has the power to elect a different leader (Interview 22).

The mixing of the political, communicative, conflict resolution, and religious structures has demonstrated being an effective response to urgent needs. In addition, the mixing reveals *Las*

Abejas' practices of appropriating and adapting different elements from a realm of pre-existing structures and experiences. *Las Abejas*' practice of mixing elements is expressed in the following analysis of the meanings attributed to the Acteal massacre. Although, I have categorized these meanings and interpretations into separate themes, *Las Abejas* often present them as mixed, appropriated, juxtaposed and transformed categories.

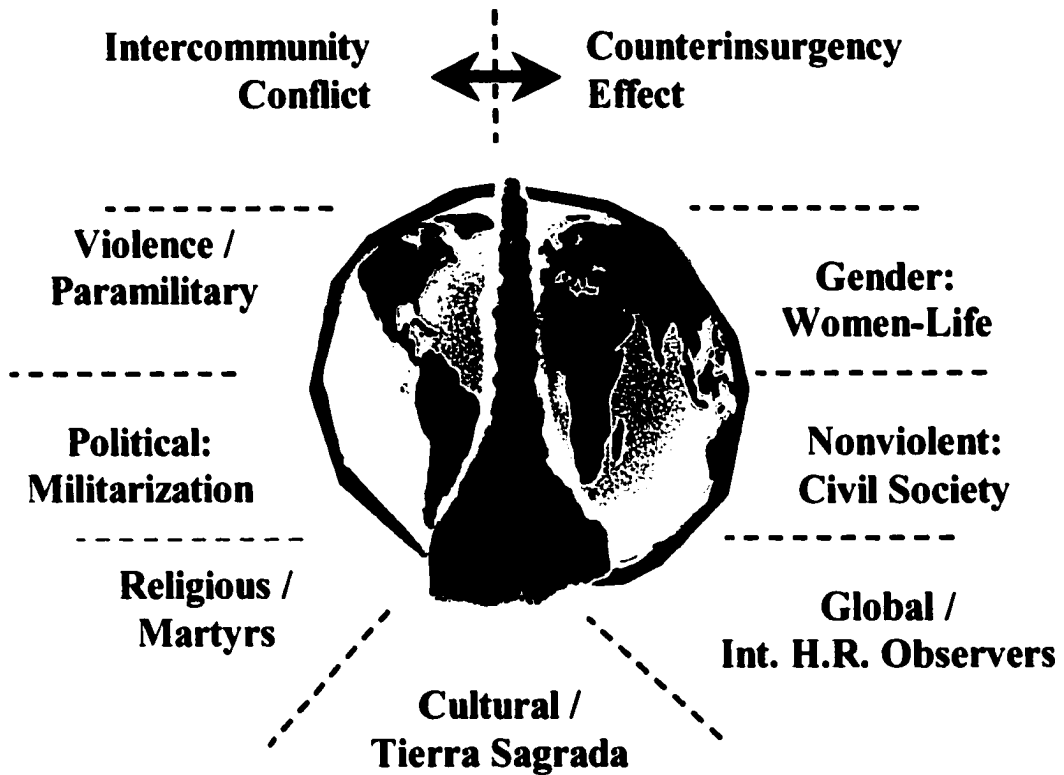
³¹ The related term "caciquismo" indicates the politico-economic and religious power structure of local rural bosses called 'caciques.' They are generally associated with the PRI government.

CHAPTER 5:
THE JUXTAPOSED MEANINGS OF ACTEAL

In the aftermath of the Acteal massacre, two major and opposing interpretations of the massacre began to emerge. The first, offered by the Mexican government, understood the massacre as the effect of an existing intercommunitarian or tribal war. The second, stated by the CDHFBC and most international NGOs, viewed the massacre as an obvious consequence of a counterinsurgency plan against indigenous communities in resistance. *Las Abejas* reflects an even more complex sequence of interpretations and meanings attributed to the massacre. What externally appears a sequence of juxtaposed meanings, to *Las Abejas* the Acteal massacre is a crucial experience characterizing their collective identity. In their 'collective' experience as Maya-Tzotziles, displaced people, victims of paramilitary violence, innocent mothers and children, and nonviolent resisters, Acteal is interpreted in multiple and at times even in contradictory terms. However, they all agree that this *tierra sagrada* (sacred land), fecundated by the innocent blood of the martyrs, pull together cultural, religious, political, and international diversities and transform them into 'one heart' (see Kovic 1997). Therefore, the diversity and unity of the meanings of Acteal symbolically embody what this work on *Las Abejas*' syncretic identity of resistance attempts to analyze. To better understand the complexity and influencing factors for the meanings of Acteal, I briefly introduce the two major and contrasting interpretations known as the 'intercommunity conflict' and 'counterinsurgency effect' thesis sustained respectively by state and national governmental organizations and by local and international nongovernmental organizations. Although inspired by these two interpretations, *Las*

Abejas attribute meanings to the Acteal massacre beyond them and more in connection with the constituting frameworks of their collective identity.

Figure 5.1: The Meanings of Acteal.



(Source: Various Interviews, December 1999)

The Intercommunitarian Conflict Interpretation

Gustavo Hiraes (1998), a journalist and government representative in the 1996 San Andres dialogue with the EZLN, best represents the interpretation of Acteal as a communitarian (read tribal) and religious conflict. Supporting Mexican official interpretations, Hiraes believes the massacre originated strictly at the local level. The causes of the massacre are found in the

divided and conflicting indigenous communities of Chenalhó and on the cultural, political and religious aspects that fomented their violent identities (see CDHFBC 1998a, 56). Hiraes characterizes the social reality of Chenalhó as a politico, cultural and religious syncretism that has generated a tribal war, similar to other African and East European contexts (Hiraes 1998, 14). His thesis seems to be supported by several local experiences of expulsions and displacement, prior to the massacre. In his words:

So, the movements of displacement were not individuals but collective and communitarians. The aggressions are not only made among individuals, groups of families, but also between communities. Revenge and punishments are not only made between people and families, but they are directed to the totality of the community "enemy," and in the same way, it has a content of violence that frequently leads to extremes of irrationality. These become the fruit of a social pathology especially when they are based on a religious or political ideology. In this sense, there is no doubt that Acteal is related to the religious wars of the European history and of the most recent that occurred in the former Yugoslavia and in some countries of the Africa sub-Saharan, or in Algeria. This political/religious syncretism has to be recognized not only to understand the reality lived in a conflict zone but also to comprehend, in its true complexity, the tragic facts of Acteal (Hiraes 1998, 15).

Gustavo Hiraes' presentation of the facts of Acteal reflects the famous *Libro Blanco Sobre Acteal* (Coordinación Para el Diálogo y la Paz en Chiapas 1998) and other official documents of the Attorney General's Office (PGR) or statements of the PRI state and Mexican government under the presidency of Ernesto Zedillo Ponce de León (1994-2000). Based on the assumption that the Acteal massacre was the effect of increased tensions between opposing communities and parties in Chenalhó, they blamed the EZLN, particularly the Polhó autonomous base (Hiraes 1998, 135). In this interpretation, the existence of paramilitaries is denied and substituted for violent armed indigenous communities (Hiraes 1998, 35). No government agencies are blamed for the massacre. There was no state of national planning or compliancy (cf. Correa 1998). Rather it was a local/communitarian reaction to the rebellious enthusiasms

fermented by the EZLN and the CDHFBC.

The political/religious syncretic reality described by Hiraes also suggests that the SCLC Diocese is responsible for the massacre. Their apparent 'pastoral accompaniment' of indigenous communities masked the Catholic Church's practices of instigating rebellion against the government and hostility against Protestant Churches (Hiraes 1998, 132). The presence of national and international human rights observers in Chenalhó, promoted and organized by the CDHFBC, were also blamed. Their position, clearly favoring Zapatista communities, contributed to the ideological separation between indigenous communities and therefore to the escalation of violence. As the PGR declared a few days after the massacre:

These conflicts can be clearly characterized as intercommunitarian, and even interfamilial, inside a context of constant dispute for the political and economic power, as well as for the existence of a religious diversity and more recently of an ideological division.³²

This intercommunitarian conflict interpretation, however, does not place conflicts between politically divided indigenous communities of the Highlands in their historic and economic context. Supporters of this thesis assume any land invasion to be negative and it therefore condemns the EZLN expropriation of the *banco de arena* of Majomut on August 1996. Indeed, new political opportunities created by the EZLN and the work of community organization and indigenous consciousness raising sponsored by the Catholic Church had encouraged the invasion.

Nevertheless, the invasion of the *banco de arena*, recognized by all as the beginning of the conflict in Chenalhó, has deeper economic and historical roots. As I described earlier (see chapter 3), the impoverishment and marginalization of indigenous communities resisting PRI

hegemony are also at the root of the violence that generated the Acteal massacre. The political-religious syncretism that Hiraes refers to as characteristic of the Zapatista-Catholic communities also characterizes conservative communities generally identified as Priistas-Presbyterian. However, it would be inexact and simplistic to interpret the complex reality of the Chenalhó conflict as a communitarian and religious conflict (see Taylor, M. 1999a; 1999b). The reality is more complex than this, as a Presbyterian and member of the Zapatista autonomous base in Polhó remarks:

Before the coming of the Zapatistas in 1994 there was unity between the Evangelicals³³ and Catholics [...]. We do not want to divide people but they do... They wanted to end the possessions of those who had more than 100 hectares of land like the land that the government gave to the people of Los Chorrros. Because of the continuing harassment of Zapatistas against them, they started to arm themselves against the Zapatistas. But the Zapatistas continued to assault people going on this land to collect corn and wood. [The Priistas] killed 18 people, most of them *Evangélicos* [Protestants]. Many think the killers were Presbyterians, but this is not true. [The authors of the massacre] were organized and went to Acteal because the last one who killed one of them was living there. They found many people armed and they had a fight. But the people with arms [the Zapatista autonomous of *Acteal Bajo*] left and who remained were only women and children (Interview 59).

Presbyterian Priistas, too, recognize the reality preceding the Acteal massacre as being much more complex than it seems. According to an indigenous Presbyterian pastor in Chenalhó, a consequence of this rather 'simplistic' interpretation is the unfair situation experienced by several Presbyterians who have been unjustly arrested simply on the basis of their politico/religious affiliation.

Acteal is the tip of an iceberg. It is not fair that both the international community

³² Press Communiqué of PGR (No. 391/99--PGR), December 26, 1997

³³ In Chiapas, the term 'Evangélicos' and 'Protestantes' is used promiscuously. However, protestant churches prefer calling themselves 'evangelical churches' to emphasis their Biblical religious identity and avoiding being interpreted only in opposition to Catholics.

and the Mexican government look at it without seeing what has provoked the massacre. Before 18 PRI people, most of them Presbyterians, were killed in Chenalhó and 22 were gun wounded by Zapatistas. On the other side 32 Zapatista sympathizers were also killed. I think it's not right to have the pressure of the international community only on one side. They have already sentenced 30 people to more than thirty years in jail as authors of the massacre in Acteal. But of the other 56 currently jailed in Cerro Hueco there are many innocent people. And there are about 180 orders of apprehensions. As a pastor, I know many of these families and they are really saddened for being unjustly accused. There is no justice when innocent people are accused and sentenced because the international community wants "justice" (Interview 43)

Nevertheless, Acteal is for certain aspects, a sad consequence of the complex religious problems existing in the Los Altos of Chiapas. The complexity of the religious context in Chenalhó and the Highlands should avoid picturing Presbyterian Priistas against Catholic Zapatistas. There are too many problems, subdivisions and different political choices and levels of social activism to be omitted from a serious analysis. To understand these complexities we need to consider Acteal at the local, national and international level. "At the community level, superficial interpretations of sects and radical religion have provided the government with material in support of their interpretation of Acteal as a tribal battle" (Interview 15).

A slightly different interpretation views Acteal as an act of resistance to change local conservative political communities. According to Joel Solomon (1998), the massacre of Acteal reflects contradictions emerging between national changes and local resistance to change. In his view, the massacre represented an attempt to oppose the political changes initiated in the country by President Salinas de Gortari and continued by Ernesto Zedillo (Proceso [Mexico City], 22 January 1998). Local powerful *caciques* are struggling in the localities of Chiapas to maintain that control and those privileges always legitimated by the old PRI group. This contradictory situation is particularly visible in the situation of Chiapas where the democratic future of the nation is being debated. In an attempt to focus on the national political changes and the

transnational innovation of the economy after the NAFTA agreement, local situations were ignored. The atrocity of the massacre in Acteal would not have occurred if more attention and justice were given to the previous incidents of violence that occurred in the municipality of Chenalhó between May and December of 1997. The lack of justice and jurisdiction, according to this interpretation, made the killers of Acteal think that they could escape punishment for such actions (ibid, 20). However, while Salomon's thesis further describes the complexity of the elements at play in Chiapas, it does not explain why a nonviolent group associated with the diocese and Zapatista sympathizers was the primary target of the massacre.

The Counterinsurgency Interpretation

The Diocesan Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (CDHFBC) interprets the Acteal massacre as a result of the government's counterinsurgency strategy. In opposition to the government's interpretation and official accounts of the whole story, the CDHFBC believes Acteal was neither an accident nor an interfamilial revenge caused by the conflict over the *banco de arena* in Majomut.³⁴ They assert that Acteal is part of a low-intensity warfare strategy advanced by Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo and implemented by Chiapas Governor Julio César Ruiz Ferro (CDHFBC 1998b). The intent was to discourage the enthusiastic Zapatista resistance based on the indigenous people's demands for a life with dignity and respect of their identity as people. Among the various national and international NGOs, the CDHFBC represents the strongest and most competent voice in the interpretation of Acteal as a cruel act of a counterinsurgency war. The Acteal massacre was intended to kill the indigenous population who

³⁴ Among several publications and Communiqués of the CDHFBC, the most important are *Camino a la Masacre* (1998a); *Acteal: Entre el Duelo y la Lucha* (1998b) and *Esta es Nuestra Palabra* (1998c).

resisted the neoliberal plan of the Mexican government (Olivera Bustamante 1998). In neoliberal logic, the resources of the land of Chiapas are more valuable than the life of the people. The exploitation of natural resources is a priority in this logic that does not eschew the elimination of people who oppose such a plan. Acteal was clearly a consequence of this logic. As in Guatemala, the massacre was an attempt to eradicate indigenous claims of autonomy and discourage people to continue in their resistance. As a former member of the National Commission for Intermediation (CONAI) commented:

The massacre of Acteal occurred in a very similar manner to those that occurred in Guatemala in the 1970s and 1980s. The substantial difference is that Acteal received a much bigger impact in the international community. "We can certainly say that if it was not for the solidarity, appeals and presence of international organizations we could have seen many other 'Acteals'" (Interview 17).

According to this theory, Acteal confirmed the presence of paramilitaries, which are along with the militarization of the municipality, clear signs of the Mexican government's counterinsurgency plan against the EZLN and its supporters. In 1998, on the pretext of searching for arms and to putting an end to intercommunitarian conflicts, the Mexican army launched a new military offensive similar to the 1995 operations (Fazio 1996). Even though the massacre was clearly perpetrated by an armed Priistas group in the Chenalhó area, the army also invaded Zapatista communities in the Lacandon Jungle hundreds of kilometers away. They reportedly persecuted indigenous people and interrogated them about their relations with EZLN leadership. These events explain why Subcomandante Marcos and the EZLN leadership went so far as to consider the Acteal massacre as a "coup d'état" by the General Command of the Seventh Military Region in Chiapas (*La Jornada* [Mexico City], 13 January 1998). Long before Acteal, *Las Abejas* and the CDHFBC had denounced presence of paramilitaries in Chenalhó. Typically used in counterinsurgency conflicts, paramilitary presence in Chenalhó was proven with the Acteal

massacre. Nevertheless, the Mexican government denied its presence until November 12, 2000, when “the federal government of Mexico sent a force of 1000 heavily armed federal police (PGR - attorney general's police) to the state of Chiapas with the stated intent of ‘disarming the paramilitaries.’” (CPT Communicate, 13 November 2000).

A few days after the massacre, the popular magazine *Proceso* published a leaked copy of the army’s “Campaign Plan Chiapas 94” that called for psychological and other tactics, including the support and training of paramilitary organizations, to divide the civilian population.³⁵ The plan was written by General José Rubén Rivas Peña, a 1980 graduate of the U.S. Army School of the Americas in Fort Benning, Georgia (Stahler-Sholk 1998). At the same time, journalists of *La Jornada*, a non-PRI controlled Mexican newspaper, collected eyewitness testimonies of Mexican soldiers and public security officers training paramilitary groups in the post-Vietnam strategy of low-intensity warfare.³⁶ After a year of investigations, the CDHFBC published a study comparing the ‘surrounding of the victims, framing, blocking, penetrating and attacking’ war tactics described in military manuals used by Mexican Army and Security Police with the tactics used by the Acteal aggressors (CDHFBC 1998b, 39-45). The conclusion of this study was evident: Acteal was planned and perpetrated according to counterinsurgency tactics. As Alejandro Nadal observes:

Acteal was the predictable result of the Zedillo government’s counterinsurgency approach to this situation. There are three closely interrelated components in this approach. The first rests on the strong military presence in Chiapas in order to neutralize and, if possible, destroy the EZLN. The second consists of a façade of being actively engaged in a peace process. The third element is the growing set

³⁵ Carlos Marín “Plan del Ejército en Chiapas desde 1994: crear banda militares, desplazar a la población, destruir la base de apoyo del EZLN.” *Proceso* 1105 (1998): 6-11.

³⁶ See in particular Jesus Cuevas Ramirez. “Apoyaran soldados y policias a paramilitares de Chenalhó” and “En Canolal existe un base de operaciones de priistas armados.” *La Jornada*. January 2 and 3, 1998.

of paramilitary groups that are the backbone of the counterinsurgency war in the North and Los Altos region of Chiapas (Nadal 1998, 16).

The CDHFBC, in collaboration with numerous other national and international NGOs continued their investigations on the massacre. Particularly, they attempted to find proof of the connection between paramilitaries and the government by tracing the origin of the weapons used in the aggression of Acteal. However, because of the complex chain of intermediaries, it was difficult to prove the direct or indirect link with the Mexican Army. No matter how difficult it is to find evidence, numerous scholars and organizations continue to view the Acteal massacre as a product of the Mexican government's counterinsurgency plans.

In any case, neither the counterinsurgency nor the intercommunitarian interpretations of Acteal account for the complex reality of multiple and juxtaposed meanings attributed to the Acteal massacre. Based on my fieldwork among *Las Abejas*, I have recognized seven categories of meanings: violent, political, cultural, religious, gender, nonviolent, and global. Most of the time, these meanings are juxtaposed and mixed indifferently from their origin. But what all these meanings clearly represent is the centrality of the Acteal massacre for the construction of *Las Abejas'* identity and resistance.

Violent Meanings of Acteal: Paramilitary Presence

Violence is an ambiguous reality with different, if not opposing, implications. The 1997 assassination of 45 people in the community of Acteal was the bloodiest episode of violence in Chenalhó and Chiapas since the 1994 Zapatista rebellion. The Mexican government often referred to the violence of Acteal in support of their interpretation of "Indian on Indian" conflict (Roett 1995). Internationally, too, Acteal confirmed how violence belongs specifically to the "Indian savages." As a *Wall Street Journal's* article commented a few days after the Acteal

massacre: “Violence has become an increasingly frequent way to settle political and judicial differences in Chiapas since the start of EZLN armed rebellion” (*Wall Street Journal* [New York], 9 January 1998). However, for *Las Abejas* who survived the massacre, ‘Acteal’ does not mean ‘Indian violence’ but ‘paramilitary violence.’ Two days after the massacre, *Las Abejas* expressed their sorrow and denounced paramilitary violence in a communiqué to the national and international press:

Today, with lots of pain in our hearts we would like to make public that the Priistas Caciques and the paramilitary groups killed our innocent brothers and sisters. They also killed the leader of our area, Alonzo Vázquez Gomez. They killed him because he is in disagreement with their violence (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 24 December 1997).

Violence always existed in Chenalhó, but the brutality with which the massacre occurred horrified *Las Abejas*’ consciousness. As a young *Las Abejas* catechist recalls on that dolorous Christmas evening:

“Our hearts were really sad and we worried for our brothers and sisters because paramilitaries killed innocent people. We are the victims of their brutal violence... They gunned a pregnant woman, then opened her wound and took out her baby... In that sad Christmas, Jesus was born with stabbings...” (Interview 22; cf. Huerta Patiño and Boldrini 1998).

In Chenalhó, violence escalated since May 1997 when *Las Abejas* refused to economically cooperate with local armed groups for the acquisition of new weapons. In consequence, they were threatened, kidnapped and tortured (CDHMAP and CDHFBC 1998). While writing these reflections in November 2000, I received continuous communiqués from *Las Abejas*, who were afraid and concerned “about another Acteal” and the increasing paramilitary threats. Armed groups in Chenalhó have existed since the *pistoleros* or white guards, generally individuals coming from other communities, who were hired to protect the interests of wealthy

and powerful landowners (Navarro 1998b). The aggressors of Acteal, however, have been identified as people coming from local indigenous communities linked with the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) (Ibid.). Most of the adherents to these paramilitary groups have been identified as young men frustrated by landlessness and long-term unemployment (*La Jornada*, December 23 1997). Nevertheless, their presence is not normal and their organized violence is not casual. As a director of a local NGO observes:

The people who belong to paramilitary groups do not come from the outside. In the municipality of Chenalhó they all know each other. That is why it is so common for some leader of *Las Abejas* to establish dialogue with paramilitaries. Even the use of weapons is not foreign to the people of Chenalhó. However, the systems of paramilitary organizations is something new and never found before... The government's attempt is to present Acteal as a normal event, fruit of continuous tribal wars among the indigenous populations of Los Altos. However, paramilitaries organizations come from a government strategy of low intensity warfare aimed to eliminate the popular support to the EZLN...(Interview 15).

The violence of Acteal is interpreted by *Las Abejas* as "a necessary violence" (Interview 28). They know that "the blood of [their] companions will bring new life to the people, to the state, the nation and the world" (Ibid). The extreme sacrifice of their brothers and sisters helped *Las Abejas* unmask the violent reality of economic exploitation, political manipulation and paramilitary threats. Months before, numerous families of *Las Abejas* had to leave their communities and abandon their homes to escape paramilitary violence. The numerous denunciations of the CDHFBC and the CONAI were systematically ignored by the Mexican government and kept away from the international community. Acteal unmasked those realities. As Oscar Salinas, Pastoral Vicar of the SCLC Diocese observes:

With Acteal, the war of paramilitaries was unmasked. This massacre shows the violence of political and economic interests when the life of the indigenous people is considered nothing...The massacre of Acteal is, as Don Samuel calls it,

a historic divide. Acteal gave light to many hidden factors such as paramilitarization, displacement, and hunger that the Mexican and Chiapas government wanted to hide in front of the international community. It was in consequence of the massacre that many people from many countries have come here to understand "why the massacre." Here they understand that this extreme act of violence is the result of many other forgotten and purposely hidden violent realities (Interview 56).

Las Abejas are aware of this point. National and international nongovernmental organizations have documented the existence and activities of at least 12 armed groups concentrated in the Highlands, North and Lacandon regions of Chiapas (see Castro and Hidalgo 1999a; Nadal 1998). With the exception of Paz y Justicia, who is legally registered as an *Asociación Civil* (Civil Association), the existence of other paramilitary groups is still debated (Hirales 1998).³⁷ The question is whether to classify them as organized paramilitary groups or simply armed group of people with no particular affiliation. In the case of Chenalhó, these armed groups have been recognized as organized and supported by local members of the PRI party (Nadal 1998).

The exact number of people who are members or forced to participate in these armed or paramilitary groups in Chiapas is difficult to determine. However, anthropologists André Aubry and Angélica Inda recently found 255 armed members of paramilitaries in nine localities of the municipality of Chenalhó alone (Aubry and Inda 1998; Nadal 1998). The most numerous group has been identified in the hamlet Los Chorros, where most of the gunmen who attacked *Las Abejas* in Acteal came from. Since the Acteal massacre, practically all *Las Abejas* communiqués denounce the situation of paramilitarization and assert that this organized violence responds to the

government's plan to annihilate resisters. In their words:

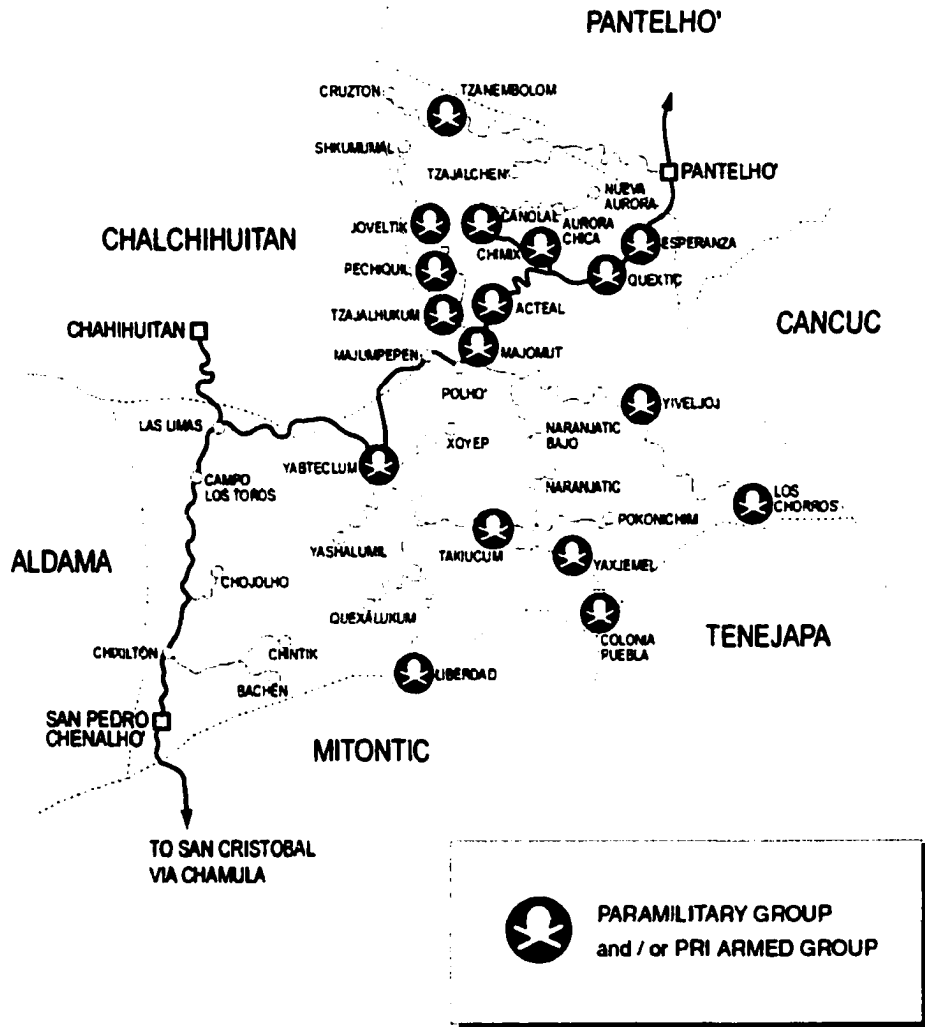
We have participated together with the national and international civil society. All realized our performance and participation, but the federal, state and municipal governments as well as the PRIistas and Cardenistas were coordinated to militarize more municipalities of the State of Chiapas, with the Mexican Army. Only in our municipality of Chenalhó 20 camps of the Mexican Army are installed with approximately 2000 troops. In the whole State of Chiapas there are approximately 70,000 troops of the Mexican Army, besides the Public Security, and approximately 16 strongly armed paramilitary groups with weapons of high caliber of exclusive use of the Mexican Army, such as machine guns like AK-47, R-15 and automatic rifles. But the President from Mexico cannot kill us with his army because we are civilians, and we don't agree with the harassments that seek to put an end to all of us by killing us. The paramilitary groups were formed to sustain their political party allowing them to continue with their corruption and power (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 22 September 1998).

The paramilitary presence in Chenalhó forces *Las Abejas* to continually be displaced.

Continuing threats of paramilitaries and relatives of imprisoned paramilitaries keep *Las Abejas'* traumatic memories of the massacre alive. Very common rumors among *Las Abejas* refugees are: "The paramilitaries are coming to do another Acteal" (Interview 04). Among *Las Abejas*, the word Acteal has become synonymous with massacres and paramilitary violence.

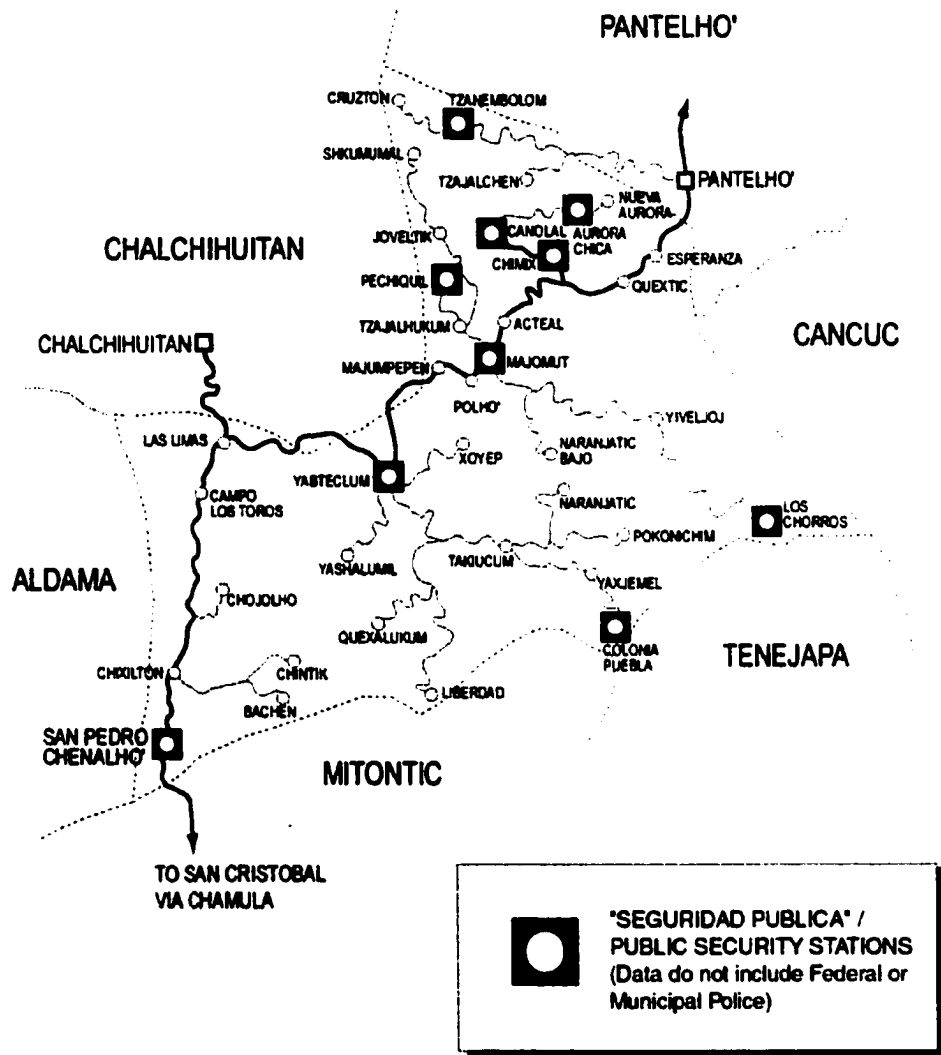
³⁷ The major paramilitary groups recognized in Chiapas are: Paz y Justicia; Los Chinchulines; Los Puñales; Movimiento Revolucionario Indígena Ant Zapatista (MIRA); Mascara Roja; Grupo Los Plátanos; Alianza San Bartolomé de Los Llanos; Priistas Armados; and Pistoleros or Guardias Blancas (CIEPAC, 1998).

Map 5.1: Paramilitary Presence in Chenalhó



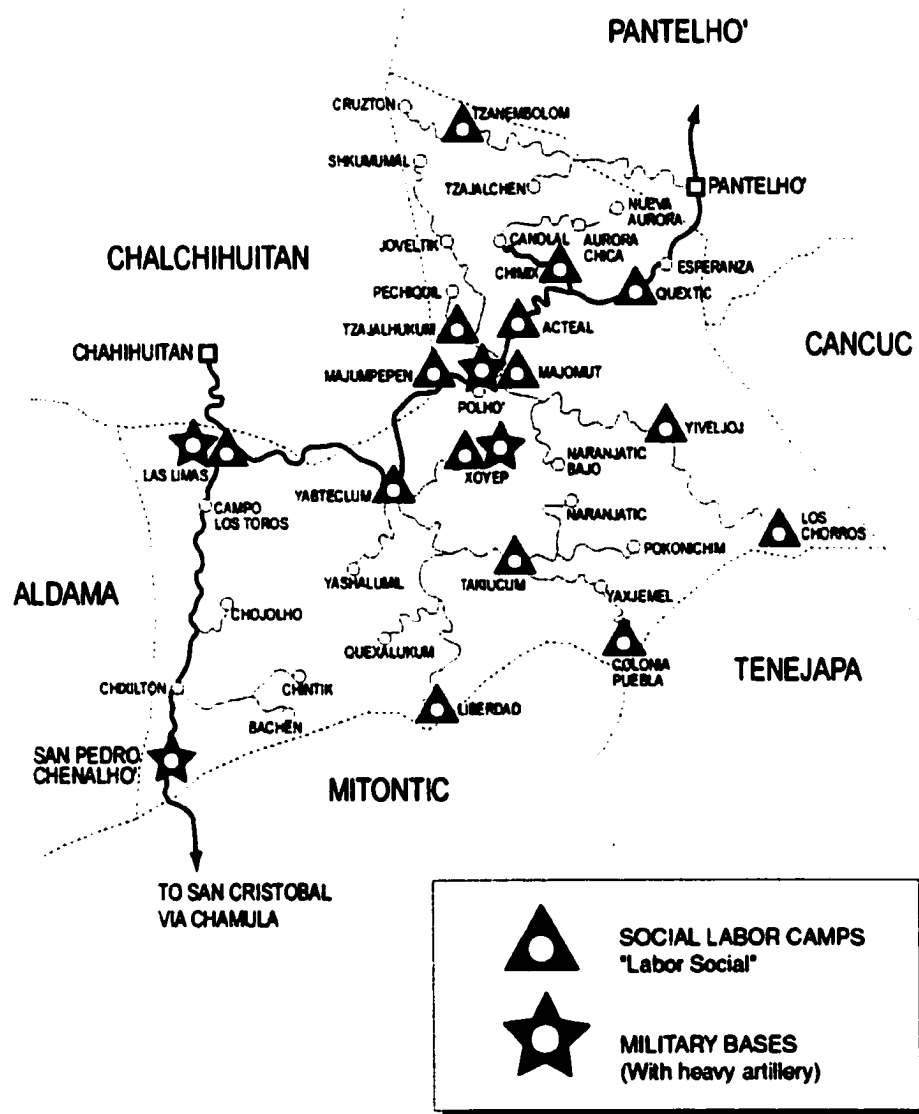
(Source: Mesa Directiva, December 1999)

Map 5.2: Public Security Police in Chenalhó



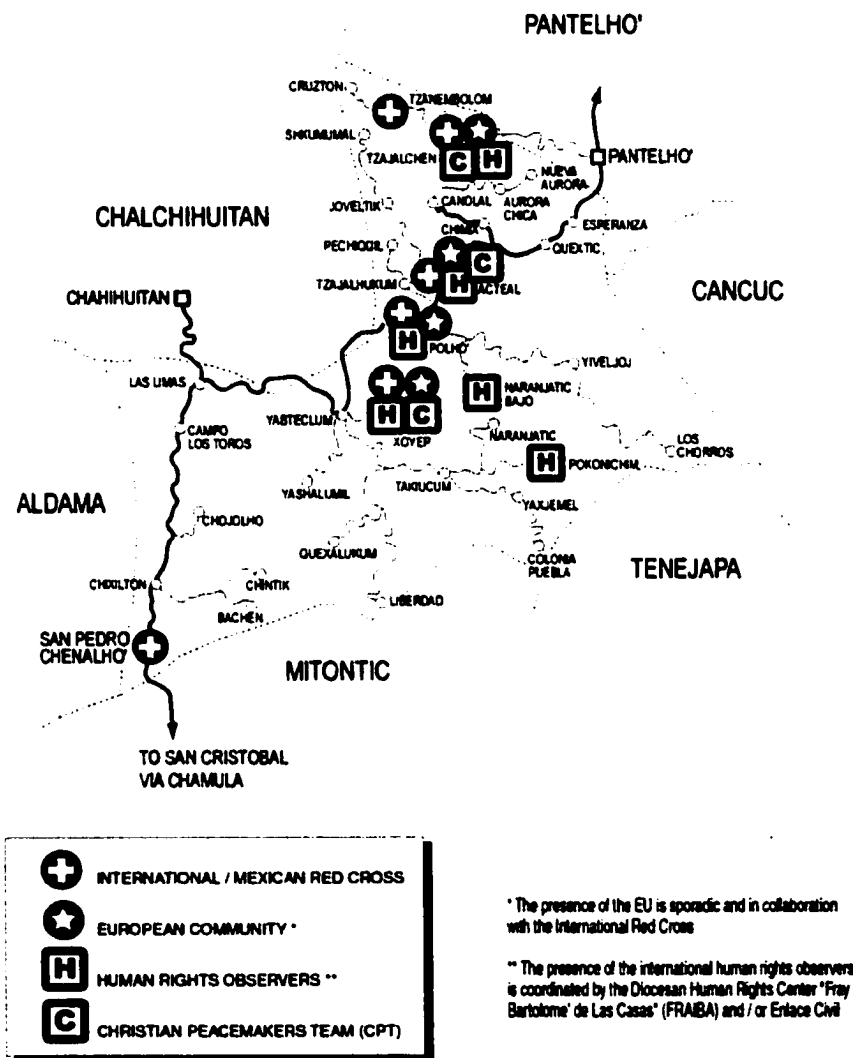
(Source: Mesa Directiva, December 1999)

Map 5.3: Military Presence in Chenalhó



(Source: Various Interviews and Observations, December 1999)

Map 5.4: International Presence in Chenalhó



(Source: Various Interviews and Observations, December 1999).

Political Meanings of Acteal: Military Presence

The EZLN and numerous national and international NGOs agree that the PRI government and its politics of war against indigenous people in resistance produced the massacre in Acteal. The horror of this massacre becomes the undeniable proof of the Mexican government's politics of extermination. It is the symbol of political struggle between the PRI who want to maintain power and a civil society who is demanding justice, land and democracy. As Subcomandante Marcos communicated a few days after the massacre:

Acteal is the symbol of a form of government: that simulates peace but makes war; fakes dialogue while preparing betrayal; promises peaceful solutions while assassinating innocents. Acteal is a symbol of a war of extermination, the true governmental answer to the just demands of the indigenous people in Mexico. In these days the government's ambassadors are dispersed around the world to sell lies and hide massacres. But at this point it is not a secret that on December 22, 1997, the Mexican government commanded to assassinate 45 children, women and men in the indigenous community of Acteal. Death squads, armed, trained and directed by the government attacked an indigenous group, killed and wounded children, opened the womb of a pregnant woman, and destroyed everything they found in their way.... But Acteal is also a symbol of the struggle between two efforts. One in which the government seeks forgetfulness and impunity triumphs; and the one of the civil society that demands true justice, and refuses to forget the worst crime of the last thirty years... (EZLN Communiqué, 27 December 1997).

Why innocent people were so brutally massacred found meaning in the connection with the ongoing political struggle between EZLN and PRI government. The testimony of numerous Abejas confirmed the collaboration of local police with the actual perpetrators of the massacre. Public security police and the Mexican army were soon identified as representatives of a corrupt government who planned the massacre of Acteal. A few months later, numerous copies of a provocative flyer appeared on the walls of San Cristóbal. It represented the bloody hands of Ruiz Ferro, the Governor of Chiapas, Ernesto Zedillo, the President of Mexico and President Bill

Clinton. The inscription read: “Murderers! Guilty of the assassination of 45 Tzotzil peasants in Acteal.” *Las Abejas*, although maintaining their ‘neutral’ position as “Sociedad Civil” and remaining careful to not be manipulated from either side, attribute a political meaning to the massacre of Acteal. As a leader of *Las Abejas* declared in an interview:

Acteal revealed how the nature of the conflict is not intercommunitarian or interreligious, as the government presents it, but ideological and political... and the government is clearly involved in it. We clearly denounced this as it was proven by the passive presence of the Public Security Police and the federal army a few meters from the place of the massacre. They were there, and although the shooting lasted several hours they did not intervene. Some of the survivors have witnessed armed paramilitaries accompanied by Public Security’s trucks. On December 22 there was a patrol car of the police going up and down the road from Chenalhó to Pantelhó until 9:30 in the morning. Then, they mysteriously disappeared and the paramilitaries started shooting at 11:00AM. We also know that in the afternoon there were several radio communications, using the radios of the police, between PRI communities... The government paid lawyers to defend its police people. This clearly shows how the state and federal government are involved with the paramilitaries who killed in Acteal (Interview 22).

This political consciousness is often manifested in *Las Abejas* communiqués and in their public events. The organization makes sure that on the 22nd of each month, the massacre is commemorated in Acteal. The ‘internal’ religious anniversary of the massacre becomes the occasion for new political initiatives to demand justice, the respect of the San Andres Peace Accords and the recognition of their political and cultural rights. Often, public prayers and processions in front of military bases or government representatives accompany people praying at the common tomb of the martyrs.

On the annual anniversary too, the political meanings of the Acteal massacre are manifested even more. On these occasions, numerous representatives of national and international NGOs, along with the Zapatistas of Polhó, denounce how “the massacre continues as the government doesn’t respect peace and continues with the militarization of Chenalhó” (Interview

22). Acteal, alive in the collective memories of the survivors, continues to be a reminder to the world of how certain political interests go above basic human rights. An international human rights observer agreed with the political meaning of Acteal:

I have heard many times the people of *Las Abejas* speaking of Acteal as a martyrial experience and how now Acteal is a sacred ground because of the sacrifice of their brother and sisters. But for me, as an international human rights observer, I see Acteal as an ultimate and horrible expression of low intensity warfare. Attacking a civilian group in resistance was clearly a political strategy to discourage the civilian population to support the EZLN. (Interview 04).

Las Abejas appear to be conscious of the political powers invested in Chiapas. Their particular devotion toward the martyrs of Acteal is accompanied by a political consciousness that such extreme sacrifice was necessary to show the world how political powers in Mexico failed to work for the well being of the people. In the words of a *Las Abejas* catechist from Xoyep:

In Acteal, they gave their lives for all humanity. Their sacrifice was to denounce to the world that certain political powers are not working for the good of the people... They resulted victorious in the middle of so much corrupted political power that is not at the side of humanity... (Interview 21).

The CDHFBC considers the Acteal massacre as an attack on the SCLC Diocese, specifically on Bishop Samuel Ruiz and the CONAI, a key political actor in the mediation between the Mexican government and the EZLN. *Las Abejas* was a perfect target as a civil organization directly linked to the diocese but also one who sympathized with the EZLN. Killing people of *Las Abejas* also threatened the diocesan CDHFBC and its defense of indigenous rights. This thesis seems to be confirmed by the actions taken by the Mexican government immediately after the massacre. President Zedillo pushed for a direct dialogue with the EZLN, refusing the mediation of the CONAI presided over by Bishop Don Samuel and composed of several members affiliated with the diocese. It was also after the Acteal massacre that the government initiated its

campaign against international observers, particularly those coordinated by the diocesan CDHFBC. From this politically strategic perspective, the Acteal massacre is interpreted as being a clear attempt to smash the international fishbowl in which the Zapatista guerrillas swim. There was an attempt to eliminate the mediation and protection of the civil society, including the Catholic Church, so that the indigenous rebels would feel forced to directly confront those in power.

Las Abejas indigenous communities recognize the Mexican Army not as a neutral interposition force but part of the Mexican government's strategy to control and repress their resistance (Interviews, 66 and 67). They have clearly in mind how the Acteal massacre became the pretext for introducing strategically placed military stations to control the *Autónomos* (the Zapatista support bases) and the *Civiles (Las Abejas)* (Ibid).

In their viewpoint, the Mexican Army's presence is resisted by Abejas and Zapatistas but welcomed by Priistas. According to Mexican authorities, the Acteal massacre demonstrated the necessity of a military presence to guarantee peace between conflicting communities. Priistas of Chenalhó appreciate troop presence in their communities and recognize the Mexican Army not as part of the conflict but as part of the solution (Navarro 1998b). Before the Zapatista uprising, the ideological justification for military presence in Chiapas was the "war on drugs" (Rochlin 1997). Now their much heavier presence is justified to prevent new acts of violence and to maintain law and order over the "savagery" of the Indians (Navarro 1998b). In short, the institution that has grown the most in the Highlands since the Acteal massacre is the Mexican Army. Between the 1994 Zapatista uprising and the Acteal massacre, the Mexican Army accumulated at least 35,000 soldiers the whole state of Chiapas (CDHMAP and CDHFBC 1998). After the Acteal massacre, numerous NGOs agree that their presence reached up to 70,000 soldiers concentrated in the

Zapatista areas of the Lacandon Jungle and the Highlands. As a *Ladino* in San Cristóbal told me, “this military presence is indispensable in Chiapas in order to check for drugs, illegal immigrants, stolen cars along with building roads and planting trees for the progress of the people” (Informal Interview 3 July 1998).

In Chenalhó, the 31st military area of the 6th Regiment of the Mexican Army established its military camps close to Zapatista resistance communities for the official reason of providing food, basic health assistance and barber services in the so-called *labor social* (social labor) camps (Castro and Hidalgo 1999a; López 1996). However, *Las Abejas* and numerous NGOs agree that the massive military presence in Chenalhó and Chiapas responds to political and military plans to control communities in resistance. As a former CONAI member confirms:

It’s hard to say how many soldiers are located in Chiapas. According to the official statistics of the Mexican Army there are 30,000 soldiers. Local and international NGOs agree to say that there are more than 70,000 based on an approximate calculation made by the CONAI. The newspaper *La Jornada* says at least 50,000 are surely present in the Zapatista areas. The difficulty of doing a real estimate of the military presence in Chiapas is made by the soldiers’ frequent mobility besides responding to the government counterinsurgency strategy. The military areas are not defined but they are certainly around the Zapatista areas which count about 150,000 people, even though in the last consult we had more than 450,000 votes in favor of the EZLN demands. This is because of the strength of the civil society with big and small organizations such as *Las Abejas* who clearly help the people in their political consciousness and actions of resistance. (Interview 17)

The political and economic interests in the militarization of Chiapas and Chenalhó are clear. *Las Abejas* agree with numerous local, national and international NGOs about the existing critical relationship between PRI, neoliberalism and Mexican Army. Militaries have a clear political role and because their arrival in Chenalhó coincided with the December 1997 massacre, Acteal became a reflection of current political battles for neoliberalism. As in other Latin American countries, the power of Mexican generals (*generalato*) has always played a central role

in the political sphere of the country. They have always had heavy influence in the legislative and judicial areas of the government. Most probably, with the massacre of Acteal, the military power attempted to gain more control of the Zapatista rebellion, overpowering governmental decisions (based on Interview 33).

Nevertheless, the major impact of militarization on *Las Abejas* is at the local level. Although *Las Abejas*' organization is resolute in refusing any kind of help from the Mexican Army, the political strategy behind *labor social* camps is to break the resistance of isolated and needy families by capturing their benevolence toward the Mexican Army and government.

Cultural Meanings of Acteal: *Tierra Sagrada de Acteal*

Members of *Las Abejas* wanted to have their martyrs buried together in the land where they shed their blood. They would all know that their martyrs were not dumped in an anonymous mass grave but placed in a permanent memorial symbolizing their collective memory and cultural identity in connection with their ancestors. Burying them together in the heart of their land and in the middle of their community makes a living presence of their killed sisters and brothers. As an *Abejas* woman who survived the massacre explains:

Our martyrs are buried together as a community and they are all with us, the community of Acteal [...]. They are still part of our community. We think that their presence is alive among us and we feel reassured when we live here with them. (Interview 24).

The *Mesa Directiva*, the original families and the displaced people are not the only components of the Acteal community. The 45 members of *Abejas* buried in the common grave are also considered as alive and present in the community. They too live together as community in the heart of their identity and hope. In their Tzotzil-Mayan tradition, since their death, their loved ones are seated in their collective memory, watering the roots of their resistance. One of the

leaders of the movement recalls how “those men and women will make possible that the word of their communities could be heard, they will allow their despised indigenous culture to be recognized in the dignity they have” (Interview 28). The martyrs of Acteal are at the heart of the community and the survivors are objects of community’s veneration. Bishop Samuel Ruiz recognizes the way in which *Las Abejas* have incorporated their cultural and religious view of the martyrs as an important dimension in the movement’s identity within their organizational structure:

For the community itself, the way in which they have assembled their organization is emblematic. To recognize the dignity and veneration they have for the victims of Acteal, they have asked relatives of the martyrs to take certain *cargos* (positions of leadership) in the community. This is to recognize the suffering they have but also to signify how the 45 dead are alive and present in the community... (Interview 51).

The values and strength of the Tzotzil-Mayan culture are manifested in the inclusive relationships lived in Acteal. Their cultural worldview of veneration of their ancestors is combined with an attitude of welcoming and acceptance. Thus, Acteal represents a door to their cultural identity, which is open to anyone who enters with respect and attention. Several visitors have felt enriched by the people of Acteal and by their simple but courageous living:

As a *Mestizo* Mexican woman, I see Acteal as a sign of hope. Being from another part of the country and from the middle class, I have seen a lot of racism and lack of appreciation toward the indigenous people. Looking at the experience of the indigenous people in Acteal, many Mexican people have opened their hearts.... They have started to participate and enter in solidarity with the indigenous people. Their culture teaches to us how to continue to have hope even in the middle of desperate situations. It’s amazing how these people here in Acteal continue to smile after all they have suffered. People of *Las Abejas* have an incredibly strong capacity to keep going, to resist (Interview 34).

In the Tzotzil culture, like many other cultures, ‘blood’ is a symbol of life. It is associated with water and the ‘east’ direction and it is also a symbol of God’s life. Like water ‘fecundates’

the earth and provides life for the people of the corn, so blood can bring life for the whole world. On the first anniversary of the Acteal massacre, Bishop Samuel Ruiz, knowing the Tzotzil culture well, centered his homily on the meanings of blood.

Human blood, all human blood is always precious in front of God's heart. Blood contains the meaning of life itself that is given by God. The perception of this truth is common to all cultures, in all times and in all places. For this, shedding human blood deeply touches both human beings and God. Even if it is the blood of a criminal that dies doing its wickedness... But if this blood is of a good and honest person, it contains a special force. And if it is shed in consequence of a suffered injustice, it has an additional quality. And as this blood run in the veins of a person that actively struggles for freedom, justice and equality among human beings... that blood is a blood of a hero.... But if this blood is an innocent blood of those that, in the middle of the war, have decided to walk in the radical journey of the Gospel, without any other weapon than the strength coming from love and truth... and if its is generously offered for the life of others, we are in front of the precious blood of a martyr. A witness of Christ's love. Somebody who had the privilege to mix their blood with that of the immolated Lamb of God. And as in the case of 45 lives immolated in this way, including the children, then we have an important moment in the history of salvation. This is Acteal. And for this reason we are here--because we are witnesses and beneficiaries of the fecundity of this blood that has soaked this land. We need to go barefoot then, because we are stepping on the sacred land of Acteal.³⁸

People of *Las Abejas* call this land *tierra sagrada de Acteal* (sacred land of Acteal). This signifies how Acteal has reinforced the already sacred relationship that Tzotzil-Maya people have with their land. "Their relationship with their land is like that of a child to his mother" (Interview 50). This sacred and intimate relationship between people and the earth was somehow altered with the violent death of innocent people. However, as their massacred brothers and sisters are buried in mother earth's womb, they recuperate balance and harmony in the relationship between the community and the land. In addition, their people's innocent blood soaked the earth and mixed with the small stream of water going down from Acteal into the valley.

Acteal is also interpreted as an attack against indigenous people. Particularly, the killing of Tzotzil-Mayan people in resistance represented an attempt to destroy indigenous identities and memories. According to *Las Abejas* and Zapatista autonomous, this interpretation of Acteal is supported by Chiapas' historic reality of impunity of crimes committed against indigenous people. "Acteal is a symbol of a war of extermination, the true government response to the just demands of the indigenous people of Mexico. But Acteal is also the symbol of the struggle of two efforts: that of the government which seeks to make impunity and forgetfulness triumph, and that of civil society, which demands true justice and refuses to forget the worst crimes of the last 30 years. And the struggle for memory and justice is the struggle for a just peace."³⁹

Religious Meanings of Acteal: Los Mártires de Acteal

The Acteal massacre, with regard to the time and method in which it took place, incorporates many religious symbols. Because it occurred just a few days before Christmas, it was interpreted in the light of the nativity stories narrated in the Bible. On the first anniversary of the massacre, the comparison of the Acteal massacre with the context in which Jesus of Nazareth was born gave hope to those present in that event. "Acteal was like the nativity of 2000 years ago where there were also displaced people from the imperial system. There was also hunger and cold and children were ordered to die by the 'Herods' of that time."⁴⁰ The brutal assassination of the 45 innocent people was identified with both the cruel death of Jesus as well as his resurrection. According to Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the stress on death belongs more to foreign people, whereas

³⁸ Homily of Bishop Samuel Ruiz and Bishop Raul Vera Lopez, op. on the first anniversary of the Acteal massacre, December 22, 1998.

³⁹ Communiqué from the Clandestine Revolutionary Indigenous Committee – General Command of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). January 12, 1998.

Las Abejas prefer to identify Acteal as a sign of resurrection.

The relatives of the victims came to communicate to me an extraordinary decision: they agreed to bury their dead not in separate and individual tombs but in the same place where the massacre occurred so that they could be remembered. They converted in this was this ignominious fact in a proclamation of hope and resurrection. A few days later when various internationally famous artists suggested erecting a monument representing the infamy of an act that must not be repeated, we indicated to them how the relatives of the victims and the people of Acteal preferred to deposit their faith and hope in the resurrection. (Ruiz García 1998, 19)

International Christian observers also view Acteal as a sign of resurrection and hope, but their emphasis is placed on the “ongoing death” of Jesus on the cross as signified by the continuing situation of injustice, violence and paramilitary threats. Pierre Shantz, a Mennonite member of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), recognizes the meanings of Acteal as both positive and negative. The hope, courage and faith of *Las Abejas* are contrasted with numerous elements of death, fear and despair with the ongoing situation of displacement, paramilitary threats and extreme poverty. In Pierre’s words:

Acteal is a sign of hope because of religious interpretations such as the one that sees resurrection of the people from their suffering conditions (death) into a new life, with dignity and possibility to live with their identity. Acteal is also seen as a sign of courage of *Las Abejas* that are ready to face martyrdom for the good of all people and to witness their faith in the prophetic power of resisting with only the weapon of their dignity and unity as people of God. But as I believe Jesus can continue to die on the cross everyday, so we could see Acteal as a sign of despair especially when we still hear the voices in communities that paramilitary groups are going to do “another Acteal.” To create fear at the community level is another way to kill these people by blocking their return to their original lands and communities (Interview 14).

Las Abejas are used to interpreting their situation in light of their religious worldview.

⁴⁰ “A Un Año de Acteal: La Palabra de Nuestros Obispos.” Published by the SCLC Diocese in <http://www.laneta.apc.org/curiasc/NOTIDIOC.html>

For the past thirty years, most communities have been trained by the pastoral workers of the diocese to associate their stories with the Biblical stories of salvation. The tragic events of Acteal and the ongoing persecution of innocent people soon became associated with “Jesus on the cross.” As will be analyzed in Chapter 8, this association becomes a new force in organizing collective nonviolent actions of resistance. It also gave meaning to the Christian mission of “taking up the cross” not in its passive sense but as a new way to endure in resistance. This association, common to other religious-based movements for active resistance, is recognized as being a fundamental resource for new strategies of resistance in the neoliberal age (see Brooks 1999). As Pierre observes:

During one of our prayer-reflections CPTer John offered an interesting consideration on Acteal. He was saying, “If Jesus, who died on the cross, even brings only one person, impacted to much of the world, what would happen with 45 innocent women, children and men who died in this way?” Personally I have chosen the path of CPT considering myself even ready to die... and in this I feel close to the people of Acteal. *Las Abejas* are people ready to take the cross. That is why for me Acteal is a renewal of my faith... What happened in Acteal is a perfect example of what it means to be Christian. Many were telling them to leave or to ask protection of the EZLN because something was going to happen. But they said, “We are displaced people that have nowhere to go... But we are Christians—that is why we pray and fast.” And the catechist Alonzo said, “Forgive them because they don’t know what they are doing.” He said the same words of Jesus on the cross. This is the deepest meaning of Acteal and it is this story that I am going to share at home talking about Acteal. Acteal is a great example in this age of globalization of how to be courageous people who resist with their faith (Interview 14).

Religious meanings of resurrection are also recognized in the evident transformation occurring in *Las Abejas* community and among Acteal visitors. According to the diocese’s Pastoral Vicar Oscar Salinas, in *Las Abejas*’ consciousness, the religious meaning of the resurrection is blended with social realities and is recognized in the reinforced courage and strength to resist:

Acteal is a clear sign of resurrection... It signifies the certainty of faith... Acteal, which was designed to bring an end of hope to these indigenous communities in rebellion, becomes rather, a sign for hope and a symbol of resistance. Planned to stop the indigenous struggle and life, it became a place where many united to continue their struggle with strength and courage. This is the most traditional Christian mystery, the mystery of resurrection. Today, Acteal has become an impressive source of life where the many people who visit it lose their fear to struggle. Acteal has also become a sanctuary of solidarity, a clear sign of resurrection against the deadly reality of the government's indifference (Interview 54).

A diocesan pastoral worker spoke with relatives of the killed catechist, Alonzo Vázquez Gomez. They recalled the dream he had a few days before the massacre. "He dreamed of Acteal where there was a large field seeded with pumpkins. There was a strong light coming from this field and many people were coming from many places to eat the pumpkins and leaving there stronger than before" (Interview 50). On December 31, 8 days after the massacre, there were about 400 candles in Acteal at midnight. At this point, the same diocesan worker recognized the prophecy of Alonzo and comprehended Acteal in its meaning of resurrection. In her words:

On that New Years Eve, the many lit candles on the ground produced such a strong light that it was illuminating the sky. I looked around me and recognized people from many places looking at the crosses of those killed... There I remembered Alonzo's dream and I recognized in it the meaning of Acteal as resurrection for *Las Abejas*, Chiapas and the world (Interview 50).

The victims of Acteal, with their innocent and courageous testimony, were soon identified as *los mártires de Acteal* (the martyrs of Acteal). This religious image and language is deeply linked to the central figure of the catechist Alonzo Vázquez Gómez and the remembrance of his martyrdom. Testimonies recall how during the massacre, a bullet passed through the chest of Alonzo's wife also killing her little baby that she was holding. "When he saw her falling down he did not realize that she was shot to death and he asked her to get up. When he realized that she and her little daughter were dead, he said: 'Father, forgive them because they don't know what

they are doing.' Immediately afterwards, two bullets struck him in the head and he fell down on top of them" (Interview 22). Two people who survived the massacre and who are now members of the *Mesa Directiva* recall the words of the catechist Alonzo. As he was encouraging the people in the chapel, he said:

We need to pass through the suffering... We need to offer our lives and our blood for the peace... We continue to resist, that is why we stay here even if shots are coming... Because we trust God, we are in the truth... We have to have faith (Interview 66)

All members of *Las Abejas* organization clearly identify the martyrdom character of the Acteal massacre (Masferrer 1998). They recognize martyrdom as the extreme act of faith of brothers and sisters who "had the Word of God in their heart" (Interview 27). They feel compelled to continue catechist Alonzo Vázquez Gómez's attitude of pardoning and reconciliation. Alonzo and the other 44 martyrs fulfilled the Word of God because, as a survivor of the massacre states:

Our martyrs of Acteal knew we had to go along to promises of Jesus. They knew they had to comply with the scripture. They knew that those who seek God's peace are going to be persecuted and eventually killed... In Acteal, our sisters and brothers renew Jesus' death (Interview 30)

A religious interpretation of the Acteal massacre has introduced *Las Abejas'* people to think of themselves as an elected group. They are God's chosen people to bring peace in Chiapas. The arrival of all the visitors to Acteal seems to confirm this interpretation. In the words of *Las Abejas' Mesa Directiva*:

The book of Revelations tells us that we cannot know when the end of the world will be. But the Bible says also that there will be many signs and many of them are already happening. We believe that God has done a covenant with us through the blood of the martyrs of Acteal. We can have peace in Chiapas, but before a new child will be born, a covenant with the people of Chenalhó was to be made.

God has chosen this people. All this attention of the world to Acteal is because of this covenant. That is why brothers and sisters from other countries come to us and with them we can exchange many things. There were other deaths before Acteal but nothing happened like this (Interview 66).

Gender Meanings of Acteal: An Attack Against Life

The massacre at Acteal was an attack against life. Women, who are the backbone of an indigenous community, are essential for the life and functioning of families and community (Rovira 1996; Eber 1999). Consequently, it is not a coincidence that 32 of the 45 Abejas killed in Acteal were female. Nor is it an accident that the paramilitaries constantly rape or threaten to rape women of the communities who sympathize with the Zapatistas (Hernandez Castillo 1998). Their intention is to spread terror and discourage women from actively supporting political actions (see Hernández Castillo and Stephen 1999; Hernández Castillo 1998).

The women's active role in the Zapatista resistance produced significant changes in structures of power in the communities and they came to question the hegemonic project of the nation (Caligaris and Castillo 1998). Graciela Freyermuth Enciso (1998) observes how Acteal is a reflection of the country's ongoing silent genocide--maternal death. For the last twenty years, the problem of maternal death was not considered a priority in the Mexican health system. However, maternal and infant mortality indicators are important values in assessing the quality of medical attention. About 90 percent of the complications that kill mother or child are preventable (Freyermuth 1998, 69). In the Chiapas region of Los Altos, maternal death happens six times more often than the rest of the country (Freyermuth 1997). International studies on this subject have demonstrated that the 'well-being' of a child 5 years and under directly depends on the

'well-being' and power and of the mother inside the family and society.⁴¹

The authors of the Acteal massacre who did not spare the women or children understood the correlation between the 'well-being' of women and the life of the community. In actuality, the violence used in the massacre, as recalled by testimonies, symbolizes an attack against women as mothers of the community. In the Acteal massacre, four pregnant women were killed. Survivors witnessed how the bodies were massacred with incomprehensible cruelty mimicking the Guatemalan *Kaibiles* soldiers.⁴² The violence of opening the mothers' wombs and grabbing their infants is symbolic of a politic of extermination against a particular group marginalized and excluded from a national project (Freyermuth 1998, 64). As a therapist working among female massacre survivors observes:

Acteal was clearly an attack against the life of communities in resistance. They wanted to suppress the most vulnerable and precious part of these communities: their women and children. It was a horrible and symbolic attempt to get life and hope out of these communities. The atrocity in which these paramilitaries killed was incredible. Five of the 21 women massacred were pregnant. Whoever did this knew that to attack indigenous women is to attack the whole community in its hope and life... It is possible we could have another Acteal, but even this one is producing death beyond the 45 people killed. I work with women in the management of their emotions and I know how fear produces death and despair. The Acteal murders attacked the indigenous resistance at its core, by killing women and children, the symbol of new life (Interview 32).

Death is overcome by new life. So the best therapy against death is the formation of new life and relationships. Survivors overcame their traumatic experience of death by forming new families, introducing innovative relations accepted by the community. The same community

⁴¹ Among several studies see the World Bank's *Report of the World Development 1993: Invest in Health*. Washington DC: World Bank, 1993.

⁴² For an account of the cruelty operated by the *Kaibiles* soldiers in Guatemala between the 1970s and 1980s see Ricardo Falla. *Masacres en la Selva: Ixcán Guatemala (1975-1982)*, Guatemala City, GA: Editorial Universitaria, 1992.

therapist operating in Acteal observes how, in the case of Maria Vasquez, the community accepts cultural and relational changes as a way to overcome death and trauma:

To resist against a memory of death you need concrete signs of life. Acteal was a traumatic experience of death and a calculated attempt against life. Maria, who lost nine members of her family in the massacre, is naturally looking for affection, love and a new child. Maria is a single mother, but she is highly accepted in the community and considered an influential leader... Because their culture is a culture of life and faith, not many people remain stuck in depression... We find their search for life is the most beneficial therapy (Interview 32).

Christine Eber (1998) observes how female Abejas victims of the massacre in Acteal had been part of the neozapatista movement working for democracy in Chenalhó. Her study shows the central role of women in the number of cooperatives established and the promotion of organized leadership alternatives to the formal government (p. 92). The patriarchal system of political, economic and military power attempted to discourage these initiatives of renewed social life in Acteal (see Bustamante 1998, 119).

Fortunately the whole neozapatista movement (insurgents, bases and civil society) did not respond to this act of violence with violence. As a pacifist woman working with *Las Abejas* comments:

Acteal was an extreme act of women's pacifist resistance. *Las Abejas* women are those who hold the movement's view of peace and nonviolence. I believe they have the right idea because peace is a women's issue. In these communities, women are those who give birth, nurture a child and they are the ones who hold the future of the community. It's up to us women to raise our children and resist the violence for a peaceful future of the community. Sometimes this resistance amounts to extreme levels of violence as in Acteal that require the sacrifice of these women and mothers. But they know how to give their life for the life of their children and their communities (Interview 13).

It is this association between women and peace that best explains the central role of women within *Las Abejas'* identity of nonviolent resistance. The Acteal massacre also made other

Abejas women more courageous in their resistance. Several Abejas and Zapatista women led the January 12, 1998 protest march in San Cristóbal. The extreme sacrifice of the women in Acteal gave new courage to many indigenous women and mothers, now ready to give their lives to defend their children, their families and their communities.

Nonviolent Meanings of Acteal: *Civiles* as an Easy Target

Two years before the Acteal massacre, many *Las Abejas* families painted the doors of their houses with the words: '*civiles, neutrales*' [civil, neutral]. They wanted both *Priistas* and *Autónomos* to understand their identity and refusal to directly take part in the violent conflict. Considering how the conflict escalated between PRI and EZLN supporters around the land in Majomut, it is not yet clear why the paramilitaries attacked *Las Abejas* instead of the *Autónomos* in Polhó or Acteal Bajo. Certainly, this unarmed group was an easy target for the paramilitaries. But numerous NGOs agree with *Las Abejas* in interpreting the Acteal massacre as a "hostile message to those people promoting dialogue and nonviolence" (Interview 10). *Las Abejas* placed themselves between the two parts in the conflict and remained neutral in the use of violence. They clearly expressed their position in favor of the Zapatista demands but resisted pressures from both sides and did not join any of the two parts directly engaged in the conflict. Therefore, those who perpetrated the massacre sent a clear message to *Las Abejas*: a neutral position in the war against the Zapatistas is unacceptable. Anyone who fails to join the PRI and Cardenista party is considered the enemy. Today, despite the clearer and recognized role of *Las Abejas* as *civiles* (part of the Mexican civil society), this message still resounds throughout the Highlands of Chiapas.

Las Abejas' ability to create a dialogue between the two conflicting sides started at the beginning of their movement in 1992. During the controversies following the *banco de arena*,

Las Abejas assumed a mediating role between the Priistas and Zapatistas. With the exceptions of a few positive results, dialogues were often refused and mediation not respected. A catechist of *Las Abejas* who actively participated in the Yabteclum dialogues for the Majomut diatribes explains:

Acteal came out from a series of misunderstandings between the Zapatista communities and the PRI communities. During the fighting between Zapatistas and Priistas we were afraid to be arrested. But we were encouraged by the example of Jesus who also was persecuted from both sides. The Priistas accused *Las Abejas* to be Zapatistas. The Zapatistas accused *Las Abejas* to be Priistas. After the struggle of the *banco de arena*, people of *Las Abejas* started a pilgrimage to ask for peace and they wanted to join other groups and organizations that wanted peace. But the Priistas got angry because *Las Abejas* were still sympathizing with the Zapatistas. The EZLN of Polhó was suspicious but let *Las Abejas* do this dialogue work. Certain Priista people had too many interests in maintaining their power and they did not want to work for peace. That is why we were displaced from our communities and later massacred in Acteal (Interview 21).

Las Abejas' isolated attempts at dialogue and its attempts to solve conflicts nonviolently were supported by the parish and the diocese. However, concrete international support was offered only after the Acteal massacre. Beginning in 1998, numerous NGOs, inspired by nonviolent values of *Las Abejas*, offered material support, accompaniment, and training. In addition, numerous US and European religious based organizations sympathized with the Zapatista claims for indigenous rights but were uncomfortable with the EZLN's use of weapons. These organizations soon entered in solidarity with *Las Abejas* when they came to be known as a group of pacifist victims of paramilitary violence (*La Jornada* [Mexico City], 29 December 1997). From the courageous sacrifice of the martyrs and these international networks, *Las Abejas* found courage and support to continue in their nonviolent resistance. As they communicated before numerous international representatives on the 1st anniversary of the massacre:

But we have also received from the martyrs an inheritance that has become a tender message and blossoms in our heart. They tell it to us almost secretly, as if depositing something very valuable in each one of us. And this word is very simple: RESIST! Don't give up. Don't surrender. Courage for your hearts! Continue working and fighting. Dream, continue dreaming and make others dream. You are not alone... To speak of Acteal is to speak of the pain and of the terror to the one that tries to oppress us with their power. But it is also to speak: *!YA BASTA!* Acteal speaks of resistance. It says: Yes we can do it! It says: No More!

But Acteal speaks also of a love that is big, indigenous, brother and friend. There are moments in which the sadness and the tears become happiness. Our martyrs have already passed on to be part of the strong roots of the Mayan people, of the indigenous people. The tree that represents our people has resisted for more than 500 years. It doesn't only resist, it becomes stronger and leafier, in spite of the enormous efforts of cutting it. With the massacre, the government has taken part in this effort to cut it down. The indigenous answer opposes this. Now there are sprouts, and we are not willing to hide them (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 22 December 1998).

The extreme sacrifice of their sisters and brothers in Acteal became a sign that confirmed *Las Abejas'* nonviolent identity. Although the experience was in itself traumatic, survivors were generally able to go beyond victimization to interpret Acteal as "the price to pay for peace in Chiapas" (Interview 21). *Las Abejas'* nonviolent identity also helped to overcome the temptation for revenge. Instead, they redirected their painful emotions into nonviolent means to obtain justice for the massacre and international solidarity to sustain their cause. As it will be analyzed in more detail in Chapter 5, *Las Abejas'* nonviolent dimension is so central to their identity that "[the martyrs of] Acteal make us think that choosing peace is the only way for making peace in Chiapas and in the world" (Interview 20).

Global Meanings of Acteal: Mirror and Center of the World

The brutality with which the massacre of Acteal was committed captured the attention of the whole world. But for many, Acteal became the window from where they could see the many 'Acteals' happening against the indigenous both in Chiapas and worldwide. Many compare the

Acteal massacre to expressions of war and violence in Bosnia and Kosovo. Others have seen the Zapatista rebellion as an attempted 'balkanization' of Mexico. However, as Carlos Fuente (1998) reminds us, "It is not the Indigenous people that threaten to balkanize Mexico. Rather, it is Mexico that has 'balkanized' the indigenous people" (p.9). Several national and international organizations agree with the counterinsurgency interpretation of Acteal. Nevertheless, those NGOs that began working in Chenalhó after Acteal have realized how the violence of Acteal was a mirror of the global conflicts, including increasing international economic inequality. As a human rights observer stationed in Acteal commented:

The international community sees Acteal only in its sad part of the massacre. But before, people were dying too. Maybe one or two people at a time, but they were still dying from the harsh economic living conditions and the ongoing violence. It has been absurd and *Las Abejas* always refer to Acteal in its representative meaning of many other people who have died and who are massacred around the world... It's sad that it is necessary to have a massacre for the world to wake up. And when the international community finally pays attention to it, we immediately point the finger to the paramilitaries or we interpret the nature of the conflict as ethnic saving our consciences and not questioning ourselves in our contribution and in its violent effects present even in US and Canada. Acteal becomes the scapegoat for not seeing what is really happening in Chiapas and in the world... It's true that Acteal gave more fuel to the Zapatista's argument. But Acteal also worked on the other way for the people who focus on it without considering other aspects of the conflict (Interview 14).

The massacre was a turning point for *Las Abejas* who started at the local level and proceeded to the national and then international level. As one of the founders recalls:

Since the beginning we tried to bring our concerns and requests to the municipal and state levels. We often marched to San Cristóbal and we sent delegates to Tuxtla. After 1994, we joined the Zapatistas to extend our protest to the national level. But it was only after December 1997 that *Las Abejas* entered in communication with the world through the mediation of international organizations, the presence of the international observers and the several delegations of religious groups and churches (Interview 26).

Most Abejas still live in Chenalhó or close to their original communities. Nevertheless,

Las Abejas understand Acteal as a “global” sign of resurrection. Members of its organization see the martyred death of the 45 innocent people of *Las Abejas* as a clear sign of universality. Their martyrs died for the peace in Chiapas and the world (Interview 26). The numerous international presences and frequent visits of delegations confirm *Las Abejas*’ perception of “Acteal at the center of the world” (Interview 50). For *Las Abejas*, it is clear that Acteal attracts people from all over the world not just because of the atrocity of the massacre, but also because it inspires hope for the resistance in Chiapas and the world. Interpreted in the light of their religious identity, *Las Abejas* view Acteal as a national and international monument to peace. The sacredness of the bloodshed on the land of Acteal now belongs to the entire world because “it is united to the precious blood of Christ, murdered and resurrected” (Interview 22).

Acteal has become a sanctuary of solidarity where many groups of so many nations come to visit and express their solidarity with the indigenous struggle in Chiapas. All those who visit emerge from meeting these people and visiting this community with a new sense of solidarity, and the courage to resist and continue in their struggles. But most of all, they perceive the sense of hope and faith of the displaced indigenous people there. They listen to their stories, they pray with them, and they observe how they work as a collective. Then they go back to their own communities and countries with a renewed sense of hope. Acteal represents the globalization of hope (Interview 55).

Las Abejas encourage and appreciate foreign visitors. Although the National Institute of Migration (INM) attempts to limit and even discourage visits to the refugee camps of Chenalhó, thousands have met the people in Acteal. “They have made this small place of Acteal a big center of indignation, of accusation, encounters and shared hopes. Thanks to their visits, to speak of Acteal now is to speak of Chiapas, of indigenous towns, of the many Acteals that are in Mexico and in the world.” (Interview 26). *Las Abejas* are conscious and proud that, as a result of Acteal, an intense exchange of international solidarity has been established. They do not stop denouncing to the international community how their struggle, suffering and injustices are still happening, but

at the same time they also encourage others to continue in their resistance. In words they spoke to the many national and international people who came to celebrate the first anniversary of the massacre:

One year after the massacre our situation has not been resolved. It has simply gotten worse. There are 10,500 displaced people in our municipality who cannot return to work on their lands, there are paramilitaries running loose, we have more army presence than ever in our communities with one soldier for every 12 people in Chenalhó, according to the Public Security Police. But at the same time, we have fewer schools than ever, our children have lost a year of education, our priest was expelled two months after the massacre... But our resistance is present. We have transformed our wound despite the fact that it will always be open. We want to open our hearts to you and to inspire you to keep walking, resisting, fighting and working with all the means possible so that peace with justice and dignity is not just a motto, but becomes a reality (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 22 December 1998).

Representatives of the Civil Society *Las Abejas* from Acteal recently commented that a resolution of this conflict no longer lies in the Mexican government's hands. Acteal has taught them that a real and peaceful solution to this conflict needs the intervention of the international community. The Acteal massacre exposes how local solutions cannot encompass a conflict that is in itself more than local. Whatever the level and type of interpretation that is given to the Acteal massacre, it has impacted *Las Abejas'* collective identity of resistance. With all the sufferings that *Las Abejas* have endured, they have also grown in cultural, religious, political and international consciousness. The massacre has opened the eyes of *Las Abejas*. As is said of Zenaida, the five-year-old girl who became blind after she was shot in the head: "We now see through Zenaida's eyes... The world can see through her eyes that there is no peace in Chiapas... [We see that] the government is lying when they say they want peace... We can now see the truth about paramilitaries" (Interview 22). Similarly, during the first anniversary of the massacre, *Las Abejas* interpreted the massacre as opening the world's eyes on Chiapas' reality of violence and

on the price paid by indigenous people:

The martyrs of Acteal have opened our eyes even further. We already knew how the world was, what it is like to be indigenous people in Mexico, we already knew enough how difficult it is. But we didn't know that it could come to these extremes. Our martyrs have told us how extreme the situation is. They paid with their own lives to tell us the hard truth. Now they left us [the truth] as an inheritance... (Quoted in Stephen 1999a, 28).

People of *Las Abejas* learned the truth of their conditions a long time ago. Their courage to continue in their resistance despite the massacre, their growth as an organization, and the reinterpretation of a situation of death and despair into an occasion to build new coalitions induce us to better understand the constitutive elements of their identity. The combination of meanings attributed to the Acteal massacre finds explanation in the following analysis of the cultural, religious, political, human rights, and nonviolent frameworks of *Las Abejas*' collective identity.

CHAPTER 6:
THE CULTURAL / RELIGIOUS FRAMEWORKS OF *LAS ABEJAS*

Cultural Framework: *Las Abejas* as a Maya-Indigenous Movement

The cultural framework of *Las Abejas* is where collective beliefs and values are embedded. Aldon Morris (1992) argues that the cultural framework is at the root of any social movement's identity and actions because it is at the root of human existence. From birth to death, human beings are embedded within cultural systems, that provide beliefs, meanings and orientations to their actions and social existence (1992, 351). Cultural frameworks are therefore a construction of cultural idioms, or ideologies, mediated symbols and language that allow for the expression of a complex system of beliefs and values in cognitively manageable forms. This can be better understood by combining two definitions of culture. Mayer Zald (1996, 262) defines culture as "the shared beliefs and understanding, mediated and constituted by symbol and language of a groups of society." Antonio Gramsci (1971, 253) defines the "terrain of culture as the area of the establishment of consent, historically negotiated between dominant and subordinated groups." Combining the two perspectives, culture becomes the shared beliefs and understandings that, through interaction between individuals and groups, establishes the consensus basis for society. This combined definition of culture reflects an image of transformation rather than of fixed elements. Culture is not a static combination of a set of elements but a dimension of identity continuously in need of reconstruction, adaptation and re-negotiation. This characteristic of culture is especially visible among the Tzotzil people of *Las Abejas*. Their culture, faced by new encounters and challenges, does not give specific guidelines,

but only creates broad categories that set directions and theoretical orientations on what “ought to be” (Marx and McAdams 1994, 24).

Cultural identity is related to, but not the same as, ethnicity and ethnic identity. Edward Fischer (1999) observes how “Indian ethnicity” is a socially constructed notion directly linked to colonial systems (p. 475). Europeans who invaded the later so-called “Americas” invented the name “Indians.” The myriad of distinctive indigenous societies and cultures became “ethnic groups” only as their territories were incorporated into colonial and later national territories and structures of power. Therefore, “Indian ethnicity” should be understood as “processual terms that signifies changing identities in relation to colonialism through history, rather than as a set of more or less fixed social categories” (Field 1990, 240).

Without taking into consideration these colonialist constructions of ethnicity, many anthropologists and social scientists have employed terms for indigenous groups that are different and sometimes contradictory to indigenous people’s self-identity and consciousness. These forced categorizations locked indigenous cultures and identities into a “dualism of survival versus extinction in which social scientists inevitably play the role of expert” (Ibid). *Las Abejas’* collective identity suggests that such a dualism is not useful in analyzing most indigenous movements in Latin America, whose identities should be seen more as an ensemble of possibilities for transformation. This is confirmed by numerous Mesoamerican studies focused on indigenous groups and movements’ ability to adopt and adapt discriminatory terms in order to continue in their resistance (see Kearney 1992 and Warren 1992).

Las Abejas’ cultural systems, in network with religious, political and human rights frameworks, are at the roots of the movements shared collective identity. Ethnicity, in the form of “indigenoussness” interpreted and expressed at different intermediate levels between local and

global is an example of shared cultural frameworks that can engender solidarity (Melucci 1985, 794) or collective resistance (Brown 1998; Field 1994; Scott, 1985 and 1989). The Tzotzil indigenous people of the Highlands illustrate how single communities can vary according to their diverse dialects, customs, and community traditions. Yet, while maintaining their uniqueness, they also identify across broader organizational networks. The consciousness raising process and the valorization of indigenous identity promoted by the SCLC Diocese in Highlands for the last 25 years did not promote antagonistic diversities. Rather, specific indigenous ethnic groups and traditions found solidarity in the common identity of “oppressed Mayan indigenous peoples.” As later confirmed with the 1992 counter-celebrations and the 1994 Zapatista uprising, this common identity helped the diverse indigenous communities combine their efforts of resistance. As a diocesan pastoral worker observes:

The cultural identity of Tzotzil people is a defense of who they really are. They rediscovered their own cultural dignity as people during in the 1992 movement protesting the “celebrations” of the 500 years. There was a lot of discussion on the indigenous debate regarding their cultural identities and how their existence is threatened culturally, politically and economically. Since then the Zapatista movement was diffused among the people but still secretly [...]. In 1994, the question of identity was represented much stronger along the Zapatista demands and their ability to combine Mayan cultural and religious worldviews with contemporary political and economic interpretations of reality... These reflections were then better formulated in the San Andrés Accords focused on Indigenous Rights and Culture... (Interview 49).

Since the Mexican Revolution, the government’s program of building national unity blending indigenous diversities into a unique *Mestizo* identity did not produce the same positive effect. The *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI), through educational and agrarian programs attempted to manipulate the cultural and social construct of the Tzotzil people in the Highlands (Gutiérrez 1999). The goal of these programs was to put an end to a separate cultural existence by creating an image of a grand new race, rising from the blending of *Ladino* and indigenous

cultures (Wolf 1959, 250). For the last 90 years, Mexican state policy toward indigenous people of Chiapas and Mexico has been to emphasize the homogenization of national *Mestizo* culture through assimilation and “de-Indianization” of indigenous people (Cook and Joo 1998). The ideological system supporting this objective was called *indigenismo*.⁴³ This post-revolutionary mythology glorifies the indigenous heritage of Mexico while disregarding contemporary indigenous people and cultures. Chiapas sociologist Araceli Burguete recognizes how “Indians were given a key role in the construction of the Mexican state, but only as “dead Indians”. Living Indians in contrast were denied (Burguete 1994, 7). It is like exalting Mayan ruins while nobody is interested in the “ruined Mayans” (Gilbreth 1997, 126). On the one hand, *indigenismo* sought to promote increased production and better services in indigenous communities, yet on the other hand, it was part of the broader modernizing policy that saw indigenous culture as an obstacle to development (Barry 1995, 177). Thus the national policy in regard to indigenous culture was directed toward acculturation and assimilation into the national *Mestizo* identity. Many indigenous communities resisted these cultural impositions in various ways, particularly in the school system (Gutiérrez 1999).

These acculturation and assimilation practices continued until 1992, when Article 4 of the Constitution was changed, recognizing the rights of indigenous people to practice their customs and traditions. Mexico was recognized as a multicultural nation and indigenous culture was to be put on equal footing with *Mestizo* culture (Hindley 1996). Unfortunately the reformed Article 4 did not recognize socio-economic or political inequalities. Any rights that would involve the

⁴³ *Indigenismo* refers to a variety of ideas on indigenous identity based on the notion that special values are attached to indigenous peoples but non-Indians determine the quality of these values. In my argument I have followed Las Abejas’ critical view that *indigenismo* as a philosophy and practice functioned foremost for securing or legitimating systems of economic and political governance.

redistribution of wealth or power or might interfere with the operation of the market or existing political representations were excluded (Ibid).⁴⁴

In contrast to the Mexican ideological notion of *indigenismo*, *Las Abejas*' idea of cultural identity privileges the specificity of traditions while remaining open to cultural diversity. Even in the relatively small area of Chenalhó and the Highlands, *Las Abejas* face the challenge of bringing together complex and historically culturally diverse populations. As a young Tzotzil priest observes:

The two important elements to enter into dialogue with the Tzotzil cultural identity are their language and their *traje* (clothing). I have five different traditional *traje* (clothing) that I use to celebrate in five different Tzotzil communities. This gives you an idea of the cultural complexity of the Los Altos, even only in the Tzotzil areas (Interview 49).

It is also inaccurate to speak about the pre-colonized Chiapas indigenous Mayan as a homogeneous group. Divisions already existed in the Pre-Hispanic period but they were sharpened and intensified under the colonial regime. The indigenous *traje* (clothing), for example, became imposed and standardized during Spanish domination. Some studies have suggested that Indian clothing identified each person with his or her village, making political control and evangelization easier (Gilbreth 1997, 55; Oztzy 1996, 142). The goal was also to destroy any vestiges of unity for the indigenous sector as a whole and to create "peasants,

⁴⁴ Reformed Article 4, while promoting changes in the Indigenist policy of the Mexican government, also failed to recognize economic and political rights as does the International Labor Organization (ILO) in the convention 169 ratified in Geneva on June 27, 1989. This convention provides important international guidelines for the relation between states and indigenous people. While recognizing indigenous cultural diversity and rights, it also recognizes the intimate relationship between indigenous identity and the land. The convention is also clear regarding the recognition of social, economic and political inequalities suffered by indigenous people. Such guidelines were completely dismissed in the 1992 reform of Article 4 and Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. Refer to the study of Jane Hindley (1996) for the comparison between this Convention and the 1992 Mexican reform.

stripped of their urban component to become laborers in the countryside” (Wolf 1959, 214).

Eventually, these impositions resulted in a “painful dialectic between an assumed ethnicity and allegiance and the generic colonial Indian identity” (Varese 1996, 58; and 1994). Nevertheless, Tzotzil Mayan communities in the Highlands have assumed their traditional clothing and reversed their meanings into an important element of their cultural identity and resistance (see Anawalt 1981; Anton 1970; Morris and Foxx 1994; Otzoy 1996; Nash 1993 and 1997; and Turok 1974).

Unfortunately, most anthropologists insist on studying culture outside of their social and political context, so the relationship between costumes has not been sufficiently emphasized.⁴⁵ As Rigoberta Menchú states: “ I saw a paper about a village of weavers by an anthropologist... He did his study forgetting the daily reality, the suffering of our people... To depict [people and their clothing] as wonderful is what the army and the Guatemalan government do”(quoted in Otzoy 1996, 149). This comment emphasizes how important it is to consider the colorful huipiles and embroidered costumes in a larger context where both aesthetics and politics are bound to the identity and resistance of the indigenous people.

The meanings of indigenous clothing are in continuous transformation. Today’s *Coletos*, like Spanish lords of yesterday, consider indigenous clothing to be a label of the economically, politically, and socially inferior position of indigenous people. The state of Chiapas uses images of traditionally dressed indigenous people to promote and advertise the Chiapas Highlands as a touristically attractive, and culturally remarkable, exotic place (Van Den Berghe 1994). But

⁴⁵ June Nash is certainly an exception among the vast literature on Mayan clothing. Her studies on the impact of neoliberal economy upon creation and commercialization of Mayan clothing remains a suggestive contribution (Nash, 1993).

Tzotzil people of Chenalhó are hidden even from the curious eyes of the 'ethnic tourists.'⁴⁶

Unless they are in San Cristóbal attending a public protest or a religious event, the customs of the Tzotzil-Pedranos of *Las Abejas* men and women are known only to a few. In most cases, they are known to international human rights observers and other delegations who are courageous enough to pass through military and immigration checkpoints before reaching *Las Abejas* communities in Chenalhó. Generally all Tzotziles-Pedranos consider their traditional clothing a very important component of 'who they are' and it constitutes a way to continue their traditions while being in connection with their ancestors.⁴⁷ Official ceremonies and public actions of resistance are privileged moments when *Las Abejas* communities are proud to share a symbol of their identity as a people.

Las Abejas men, like other Tzotzil-Pedranos, tend to be less traditional in their everyday clothing than the women (Nash 1995). Pedrano traditional male clothing consists of a woven short white blanket that is called *natil k'u'il* that is open on the sides and, together with a shirt, is tied with a leather belt. As an external covering, men use a short black wool blanket called *xakitail* that is also open on the sides but not tied by the belt (Perez 1985, 8). This heavy longhaired wool is very useful protection from the cold mountain air. On their heads they wear the *lixton pixkolal*, a traditional large hat with rainbow colored ribbons that is now usually bought in a store. During formal ceremonies, the colorful hat is very important component together with the *pokil*, a white and red cloth that is held around the neck (Ibid.). Most men wear the traditional Mexican leather-made *guaraches* (sandals) even though we noticed some youth wearing plastic

⁴⁶ The ethnic tourist is the one who actively searches for the ethnically exotic, in an untouched, pristine, authentic a form as he can find it. This dimension of tourism in search of authenticity and exoticism is particularly common in tourists visiting San Cristóbal de Las Casas (Van den Berghe, 1994).

boots. During their trips to the nearby towns, men have adapted to wearing more *Ladino* style clothing, usually brown or blue slacks and a button down shirt.

Las Abejas Tzotzil-Pedrano women typically wear traditional clothing. They wear a *yokvet*, a woven black wool piece that wraps into a long skirt, and a *satkuil*, a huipil woven in vertical lines of rainbow colors and embroidered with red designs around the neck (Ibid, 9). On top of their huipiles, Tzotzil-Pedrano women wear a white shawl with embroidered red Mayan symbols. This cloth protects them from cold or is used to cover their heads during ceremonies (Fieldnotes, 24 June 1999). Plastic shoes are now part of their clothing. However, because of the harsh living conditions during displacement and war, many women go barefoot.

The fact that women always wear their traditional dress does not necessarily mean that they are culturally conservative. Feminist revisions of Latin American history have demonstrated how this stereotype falsifies the female participation in the labor force over time (see Nash 1993 and 1997). Indigenous Mayan women of Mexico and Guatemala are identified as protagonists in preserving their culture through cooking, weaving and pottery (Nash 1993). However, to associate women with conservation does not really reflect women's leading role in the Chiapas resistance. The women's role in the family is in part "a response to the impoverishment of domestic economy but is also a conscious priority in daily practice and socializing children" (Nash 1995, 15). In Chenalhó, female cooperative associations have significantly contributed to the revalorization of women's daily experiences of resistance (Eber 1999). Wearing traditional clothing is part of the women's experience of discreet public expressions of resistance. Images of *Las Abejas* women in their traditional huipiles often carrying a baby on their backs while pushing

⁴⁷ To further explore the connection between customs and identity and how Mayan communities entering the global economy impacts such relation see Christine Eber and Brenda Rosenbaum (1993).

away soldiers has impacted the international community and transmitted a clear message of women's resistance, identity and dignity. For the indigenous communities themselves, wearing the colors and figures embroidered in their huipiles helps them connect to their ancestor's history of resistance.

Las Abejas women give another meaning to their huipiles. They recall the huipiles of the women killed in Acteal when the red of their clothing mixed with the red of their innocent blood. By wearing the very same kind of huipiles during public actions of resistance, they feel united with their own community and with the courage of the martyrs of Acteal. As a woman leader of *Las Abejas* observes:

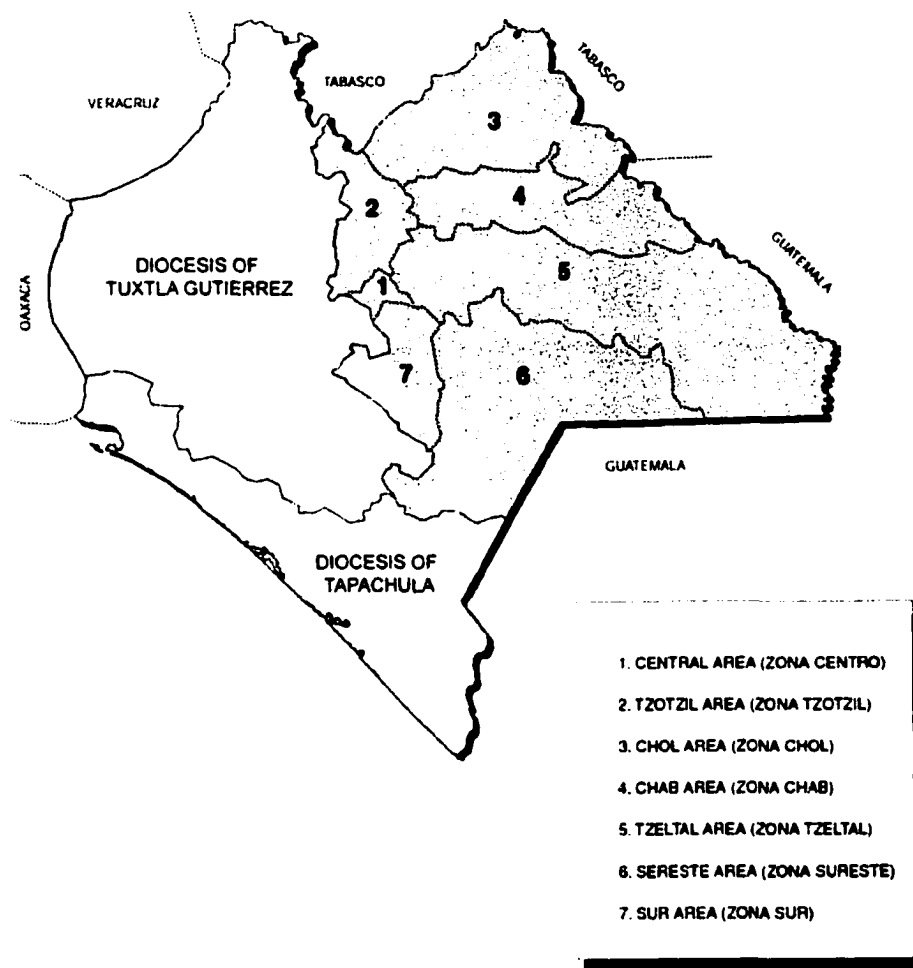
When the two women from the United Nations visited us we shared our huipiles. We dressed them with our identity of pain and hope. They are now sacred for us because our sisters in Acteal shed their innocent blood on them... They are an important sign of our people and organization (Interview 31).

Tzotzil-Pedranos of *Las Abejas* have a special relationship to their community. They value community decisions and consider a delegated responsibility from the community a sacred demand. This is characteristic of Tzotzil-Mayan culture (Collier 1975). Tzotzil people are conscious that by accepting a service, or cargo, in the community, they contribute to the good of the community and therefore to the good of their families (Cancian 1965). Their life revolves around the life of each other in work, in family and in the concerns of the community. An agreement made in the community is necessarily respected since their lives would not make sense unless it was tied to the community, which also represents their connection with their history and their future as a people. Refusing to give a service to the community is refusing to give life. It is also the negation to be born to the life of the community. Therefore, Tzotzil culture is a culture of life and of service.

This basic communitarian value in the Tzotzil-Mayan cultural identity is symbolically expressed in the traditional rite of *caracol* (snail) (Collier 1975; Cancian 1965). This consists of making three turns from the atrium of the church toward the community field, in the shape of a snail. The ritual symbolizes the service to the community and the call to life. It also expresses a human life as a journey from the mother's womb to the realization of life in the community (Cancian 1965). As an Abeja observes: "Our service realizes God's call of becoming mediators of the life generation process between God and the community" (Interview 21).

This sense of collective identity prioritizes service to the community rather than individual privileges. Tzotzil culture indicates that individual identities find meaning in the community identity and the linkage is *cargo* or service. For a Tzotzil, the *cargo* is a form of realization of his personal identity. The acceptance of a *cargo* is what gives a person dignity and respect in the community. As a civil organization, *Las Abejas* identifies itself with a particular mission among the Pedranos and for the peaceful resolution of Chiapas conflict. They perceive being invested with the particular call (*cargo*) of bringing peace to Chiapas, even accepting the extreme sacrifice of giving up their lives. Their courageous character and solid commitment to serve the good of the community is grounded in their Tzotzil cultural heritage and affirmed by the pastoral work of the Catholic Church.

Map 6.1: The Socio-Pastoral Areas of the SCLC Diocese



(Source: Oficina Diocesana de Comunicación, SCLC Diocese, December 1999)

Religious Framework: *Las Abejas* as a Progressive Religious Movement

Mayan indigenous conversion to Christianity was seen by one of the first evangelizers in the Highlands of Chiapas, Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566), as a “miracle against nature” (Yañez 1949; Gutiérrez 1993). Because, as Bishop Samuel Ruiz explains, “how could

[indigenous people] believe in God, giver of life, announced by those who exterminated life?" (Ruiz García 1993, 25). Yet, it could be argued, "Indian conversion was not so much a miracle as it was a strategy to survive the wrath of the conquistadors and missionaries" (Floyd 1997, 73). The indigenous people wanted to stay alive; therefore they converted. Several authors identify the adoption of the Christian faith by the indigenous people of Chiapas as a survival mechanism that allowed them to continue in their own beliefs and traditions while using Christian symbols (Marzal 1985; Megged 1996; Nash 1997). In this interpretation, Jesus Christ, for example, is another name for the sun and the angels signifying the lord of the earth (Vogt 1969; Holland 1963).

Thanks to the SCLC Diocese's efforts of inculturation, the ever present mixing of Catholic and Maya rituals was positively recognized and accepted. The following observations of a Catholic pastoral agent working among Tzotzil people indicates how the mixture of Mayan and Christian elements is five centuries old and it is essential for the construction of an indigenous, autochthonous church:

To arrive to a real inculturation of the Word of God into the Mayan cultures of the Highlands we should look positively at Mayan rituals. We recognize that in any true cultural encounters that are not based on domination and repression, there is always a mixture of components from both sides. What we call syncretism is a natural process of inculturation and it is essential to form autochthonous churches [...] In traditional Tzotzil prayers there are many Christian elements. For example, when they mention their *Dioses* (Gods), they name them with the names of Jesus, Christ, Lord, etc... If you hear them in their traditional songs you would recognize certain Gregorian melodies probably taught by Dominicans present in Chiapas for centuries [...] The most important part of the Eucharist, for them is the *velatorio* (candle burning) [...] There are so many Catholic liturgical elements that could easily be rediscovered and actualized by several elements of Mayan liturgies and prayers. This process is certainly in line with the Second Vatican Council's inspiration of combining the cultural and the liturgical aspect of faith. Our journey of developing autochthonous churches in Chiapas goes in the same line than the Zapatista's autonomous communities. But autochthonous is more than autonomous. The

universal character of the Catholic Church remains expressed in the churches' dynamics of being local and universal at the same time. We need more competent studies and courageous experiments in this line without the preoccupation if the Vatican is going to accept it or not (Interview 49).

With the exception of the Dominican missionary Bartolomé de Las Casas (Krauze 1999), the Catholic Church never sought dialogue about Mayan religious identity with the people of Chiapas. For the past 500 years, Catholic missionaries completely rejected the possibility that such culturally diverse religious experiences contained anything good (MacEoin 2000, 11). Until 35 years ago, indigenous people of Chiapas made every effort to avoid the priest and religious, whom they believed would condemn their traditional religious practices as heresies (see Floyd 1997 and Marzal 1985). The Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) and the Medellin Conference of Latin American Bishops (1968) opened new horizons. Newly arrived Bishop Samuel Ruiz began to envision the end of ecclesiastical imperialism in Latin America. Sustained by the new ideas of the council and the emerging Latin American Liberation Theology movement (Smith 1991), Ruiz gave the impulse for radical transformation in the pastoral work of the SCLC Diocese.

Today, the diocese is an example of the promotion of indigenous people's search for the foundation of their identity because, as Bishop Ruiz states, "when a people is conquered, it loses its own history and is only left with that of its conqueror" (quoted in MacEoin 2000, 11). *Las Abejas* as an organization most clearly reflects not only the search for identity, but also the recuperation of their right to have an identity. Its constitution resulted from numerous opportunities created among Tzotzil-Christian communities as the diocese began respecting indigenous cultures, expansion of the role of the laity and promoting a less hierarchical church (Floyd 1997, 106). With numerous changes in the diocese's theological and pastoral approaches

of indigenous communities of Chiapas, a process of consciousness raising began in the Tzotziles in the Highlands. This process, which influenced *Las Abejas* religious identity, can be distinguished by five dimensions: inculturation, ecumenism, participation, liberation and mobilization.

Inculturation Dimension: Toward an Autochthonous Tzotzil Church

Since Vatican II, inculturation has been a particularly important principle in the progressive Catholic Church in Chiapas (Shorter 1988; Carrasco 1994). In theological terms, “inculturation denotes evangelization through the norms of the local community, producing a kind of hybrid indigenous theology” (Norget 1997, 102; MacEoin 1999). As a Tzotzil Catholic priests explains:

Indigenous theology always involves a certain degree of syncretism between popular indigenous Mayan religion with Christian rituals and beliefs. The inculturation of the gospel is therefore a dialogue and an encounter between two religions and cultural systems. From this comes an indigenous mixed religious form that differentiates from the original two but that involves evident cultural elements from the two (Interview 44).

Inculturation, in respect to the indigenous religious, cultural and human identity can be traced to the 16th century missionary zeal of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas who defended the well-being of the Indians against the acute cruelty of Spanish conquerors. Nevertheless, the above form of inculturation goes beyond certain paternalistic and top-down approaches of a dominant culture that makes itself accessible to a subdominant one without losing its own particular character. Rather, the experience of the progressive church of Chiapas reflects a liberationist approach of an “equal” dialogue or exchange between indigenous (popular) and official religiosity (Norget 1997). The SCLC Diocese promoted an authentic and egalitarian dialogue between Tzotzil-Mayan and Catholic-Christian identities through the implementation of socio-

pastoral zones, indigenous theology, and indigenous leadership. These elements constitute the groundwork of what is called an “autochthonous church” (Floyd 1997, 106).⁴⁸

The diocese’s division into seven pastoral areas was a church response to the specific demands of over 80 percent of the indigenous population of Chiapas living within the diocesan territory. The initial Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolabal territorial subdivisions came as a result of the 1965 Diocesan Pastoral Council created to study the process of inculturation of the biblical message and adaptation of church structures into indigenous communities (Floyd 1997, 106). As a new bishop of the San Cristóbal de Las Casas Diocese, Samuel Ruiz was preoccupied with implementing an effective evangelization of the Mayan indigenous populations of Chiapas. Previous diocesan administrations had paid very little attention to the indigenous population in general, and were not concerned about the cultural diversity and specific social needs of the five main indigenous groups. A few years later, the diocese decided to subdivide its territory into socio-pastoral areas according to the languages and cultures of the major Mayan ethnic groups.

The new diocesan arrangement came as a “practical response to the need to sustain the church that was short in resources, particularly clergy, and was trying to address the needs of an overwhelming indigenous population (Floyd 1997, 107). Nevertheless, it came also as a deliberate choice after the 1969 Medellín (Smith 1991) guidelines to give more power to local communities by respecting indigenous diversities.

It also came as a concrete response to indigenous people who, immersed in their struggle, requested the church ministers to ‘step down’ from their pulpits and accompany them in their struggles. Bishop Ruiz recalls this change as an evangelical response to the demands of the

⁴⁸ An autochthonous church is a community organization that has its own strength, abilities and ministries all of which reflect its faith within its own cultural framework.

marginalized indigenous majority of the diocese and as a necessity to remain loyal to the identity of the church as Catholic-Universal:

An indigenous man told me years ago, if the church does not make itself [Tzotzil with the Tzotziles] Tzeltal with the Tzeltal, Chol with the Choles, Tojolabal with the Tojolabales, I don't understand how it can call itself the Catholic Church. It would be in effect a foreign church, belonging to a dominant social class... It should be fully understood that the Kingdom of God is not constructed in eternity, although it ends there, but that it is built here, starting with the poor. That is what Jesus preached (Katzenberger 1995, 72)

The socio-pastoral areas facilitated a positive dialogue between Christian and Mayan cultures. It also was a determining factor in the social and political advancement of local indigenous communities according to their specific needs. Tzotziles of the Highlands were better able to solve their problems by creating new spatial resistance (Wright 1997, 225ff) which favored community organization and decision-making. This new experience proved to many indigenous communities that the Catholic Church was, finally, respecting and encouraging indigenous cultures and traditions (Iribarren 1991a and 1991b).

With regular community meetings within and among pastoral zones, the church also provided an automatic way to link people within the zones and to link zones to each other. Those networks of communication were later identified as essential ingredients for the formation of numerous indigenous movements of resistance in Chiapas (Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 53ff). So, as the Catholic Church grew more respectful of the reliability of indigenous community organizations, indigenous lay leaders developed communication skills. Vertical networks benefited both indigenous communities and diocesan leadership. On the one hand, diocesan leadership felt compelled to offer resources and analytical tools to communities experiencing poverty, oppression and injustice, to help them identify and address the sources of their problems. On the other hand, the interaction with the communities strengthened the credibility of diocesan

leadership in their public discourse of liberation and options for the poor (Muñoz and de Jesus 1984; Norget 1997).

Until the 1970s, the Catholic Church maintained a clear separation between Catholic faith and Tzotzil rituals and popular culture in the Highlands. As Dominican Father Gonzalo Ituarte, the Justice and Peace Vicar of the SCLC Diocese observes:

Even for the church, indigenous people have always been at the front door, but have never being allowed to enter and be fully accepted. There are ten million indigenous people in Mexico, but we still don't have an authentically indigenous Catholic Church. Indigenous people have to give up their identity and their culture if they want to be fully accepted in the church (Ituarte 1998, 105).

Indigenous theology (Cook 1997; Floyd 1997) was the result of the SCLC Diocese's thirty year old option for the indigenous people which prompted cultural respect and trust in community level decisions. From the diocese's attempt to respond to the needs and specificities of the indigenous communities in the Highlands, the Catholic and Tzotzil people of *Las Abejas* identified themselves with the claims of the indigenous theology movement (Sylvia 1998; Norget 1997). Indigenous theology is based on the assumption that "there has never been a genuine theology that was articulated in an ivory tower with no referent to or dependence on the events, the thought forms, or the culture of its particular place and time" (Bevans 1992, 4).

The 'indigenization' or contextualization process is both a "new and traditional" phenomenon expressing the repressed religious and cultural dimensions of identity. Hence, any indigenous theology containing both 'inculturation' and a liberation character expressly created by people wanting to voice the uniqueness of their experience of God and their feelings of dissatisfaction with traditional ways of thinking (Gossen 1993). Indeed, indigenous theology is very distinct from Western thinking because, as a Catholic Tzotzil stated, "Occidental theology, including liberation theology, is talking about God while indigenous theology is talking with

God” (Interview 44). Nevertheless, indigenous theology has also an obvious liberating character expressed in the consciousness raising of indigenous people who are excluded and impoverished. The following declaration that emerged at the conclusion of a recent encounter on indigenous theology in Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas, confirms the relationship of indigenous theology with liberation theology paradigms of social consciousness and belief in the “God of Life” (Gutiérrez 1991).

That Word of God that lives in the wisdom of the people has wakened up our interior and spiritual force, the force of the small ones, which has taken us to open the eyes and face the difficult reality in which we are living. We are aware of our sufferings, as impoverished by the politics of the neoliberal system that causes ruin, poverty, illness and it excludes us from the development and well-being of our people. But we know that the God of Life has never abandoned us and has always walked with us accompanying us in our struggles and organizations. This conscience makes us discover that we can continue ahead, because God always accompanies us, although we do not always see it. He teaches us how to work, how to be His children, because it is God of Life and for that reason we are happy! For that reason we have the strength, because He is a near God that walks on our side. God lives in the heart of the community and it organizes us to get rid of the tigers. Rescuing our values is building the Church that is the House for all, a New town, a New Culture. Our cultures enrich other cultures and the Church. Our elderly people are light; through them God becomes present and he becomes present with us when they pray and when we listen to them. We refuse to die and our fight is the fight of all the natives of Mexico (Final Communiqué at the IX Ecumenical Encounter of Indigenous Mayan Theology [Amatenango del Valle, Chiapas] 15 October 1999).

The liberating character of indigenous theology is also visible in the dynamic interpretation of tradition. Indigenous theology emphasizes the recuperation of Mayan medicine, music, dress and dances particularly celebrated in church sponsored festivities such as saints' day fiestas, the Day of the Dead, and other traditions essential to indigenous religiosity. However, *Las Abejas* refuse certain traditional indigenous customs and practices such as abuse of cargo authority in the community or alcohol consumption in ceremonies (see Eber 1995 and 1998). Thus, the traditional values underlined by indigenous theology are always discerned by other

activities of the community, particularly those that promote women's emancipation and indigenous autonomy. *Las Abejas* indigenous communities go beyond an idealization of indigenous traditions typical of certain liberationist pastoral programs (see Norget 1997), and recognizes the dynamic aspects of tradition. In the words of Oscar Salinas, Pastoral Vicar of the diocese:

Indigenous theology is an important space of reflection for *Las Abejas*. But they consider other areas of reflection important that help the people in their process of redefining their identity such as women and autonomy... People's religious identity is every day more modern and in evolution of their traditional beliefs. There is no longer a religion based on the agricultural cycles. Now we have a people that have accepted the Bible to recognize their world and to question certain assumptions. For example, they question certain traditional sacred visions of authority or the abuse of alcohol in religious ceremonies... We have like a fecundation of their traditional customs. Tradition is not interpreted anymore as something untouchable but as something in transformation for the goals of the community. And these people have an incredible ability to adapt their identity to better look toward the future (Interview 56).

Las Abejas reconcile Tzotzil-Mayan traditions with Catholic-Christian thoughts through biblical analogy. Their cultural traditions constitute a sort of "Old Testament" with their own history of salvation, struggle for autonomy and claim for land. As is typical in several other liberation theology movements (see Smith 1995; 1999; Lancaster 1988; Marcello de Barros 1983), liberationist interpretations of biblical stories gave *Las Abejas* meaning to their identity, struggle and resistance. As a founder of *Las Abejas* explains:

Las Abejas is a new organization based on the older experience of the Catholic Church [...]. Thanks to the pastoral work of the church we have learned the story of the people of Israel when it was living in slavery in Egypt, as described in the Old Testament. We have also learned that these stories of liberation and salvation are alive in today's stories of peoples searching for freedom and justice. We have also learned that God cares for our cultural traditions that are essential to really understand the vitality of today's stories of salvation and liberation. Indigenous theology has been particularly helpful to see ourselves with our own Old Testament stories. It was through the different approach of indigenous theology

that we learned how to go back to our cultural traditions and refer to it for our spiritual life and moral decision. Our ancestors did not have the Catholic Church but they knew how to respect the elders and therefore there was no robbery, no bad words and they knew how to pray. Indigenous theology does not depend on the directives of the government or of the *Mestizos* (Interview 26).

Over the past thirty years, the increasing numbers of indigenous priests, deacons, and catechists in the SCLC Diocese symbolize the partial realization of an inculturated autochthonous church (Meyer, 2000). Today, there are about 7,922 catechists and 950 of them are women. There are also 311 indigenous deacons working in the socio-pastoral areas of the diocese. However, because the Roman Catholic Church does not recognize the validity of a married priesthood, married indigenous deacons of Chiapas are not allowed to be ordained priest. As in many other indigenous cultures, it is incongruous that “a person who does not have the experience of managing a family and living in a family has the qualities needed to speak to an entire community” (Ruiz García, quoted in MacEoin 2000, 12). Indigenous who are ordained priests have passed through a process of transculturation institutionalized in the seminary formations and requirements. There is still a long way to go for a priesthood that reflects indigenous cultures. Nevertheless, the strength of an autochthonous church in Chiapas is the consciousness and active leadership of women and youth. Their grassroots-based leadership explains *Las Abejas* facility to mobilize communities for collective actions of resistance. According to the last internal census of the diocese, there are about 6,832 active women in 354 women groups. Youths are numerous too, with about 4,430 active members in 239 groups. There are also 985 health promoters working in 221 community health centers. About 3,066 people participate in Christian Base Communities (CEBs). Choir singers and instrument players are other important groups around which social actions are created and religious identity defined. The combination of reduced number of participants and specific activities in each group are important factors for the promotion of local

leadership, cultural adaptation and advancement in the construction of an autochthonous church.

Ecumenism Dimension: Costumbristas, Católicos y Evangélicos

Inclusion of different religious denominations and experiences is one of the specific aspects of *Las Abejas* religious identity. Although the majority are Tzotzil-Catholics, *costumbristas*, meaning people who are baptized but follow only traditional Mayan religious practices, along with Presbyterians and a small number of Pentecostals are present and respected in the organization. Presbyterian Abejas number about 5 percent while about 10 percent of the people identify themselves as *costumbristas*. For the past 30 years, catechists of *Las Abejas* have been part of an ecumenical commission for Bible translation in Tzotzil. José Vázquez, an Abeja catechist from Xoyep, remembers how this commission made the creation of numerous other experiences of collaboration possible. It also helped the represented churches better understand each other and their religious worldviews as they discussed how to write a unique Biblical version (Interview 21). In Tzajalchen, the community where *Las Abejas* was founded, ten Presbyterian families and 2 Pentecostal families live together with the Catholic majority. Two of the founders of the movement are Presbyterians and are still actively involved in the organization's leadership. When I visited Tzajalchen in June 1999, numerous families of different religious backgrounds were helping construct a new house for a family who had to move because of the construction of a new road through their community. Government authorities that present the Chenalhó situation as a religious conflict purposely hide these ecumenical dimensions of *Las Abejas* identity.

Their multi-religious identity also contrasts with the stereotypical argument that presents the Chiapas conflict as PRI-Presbyterians versus Zapatista-Catholic. Mark Taylor (1999a; 1999b) has argued that within the Presbyterian Church in Chenalhó there is a difference between

Presbyterian PRI , supported by the National Presbyterian Church of Mexico (NPCM) and Reformed denominations in the U.S., and the Presbyterians of the Zapatista autonomous community in Polhó (Taylor 1999b). Presbyterians of Polhó who chose to oppose the government and support the neozapatista movement were completely excluded from the national Presbyterian structures. Various *ancianos* (elders) and Tzotzil pastors left the Zapatista sympathizing majority of their community to form other churches and remain faithful to their churches. They condemned Zapatista sympathizers as “followers of Liberation Theology and not of the Word of God (Interview 42). Presbyterian *anciano* Domingo Perez Paciencia, the president of the Polhó autonomous community, has led Polhó in vigorous support of the Zapatista movement even at the price of a separation with their pastors (see Taylor 1999b). The Presbyterian Abejas, however, even though they were determined in their resistance and political choice, remained linked to the church structure and they continued their pastoral relationship with Tzotzil pastors and American missionaries. Abejas *ancianos* regularly attend meetings with other Presbyterian *ancianos*, the majority of whom are PRI supporters. They still have their own chapels and meetings even amid the almost totally Catholic identity of their village. It is common, however, to see the participation of Abejas Presbyterians during important *Las Abejas* or Catholic Church activities. Many Protestant families, for example, recognize Bishop Samuel Ruiz as ‘their bishop’ (Interview 51). A Presbyterian founder of *Las Abejas*, explains:

We as Presbyterians of *Las Abejas* always participate in the ceremonies where Tatic (Bishop Samuel Ruiz) is present. I like to see and listen to him because he is a prophet. God made a deal with Tatic because God heard the cry of this people. He is not the head of the Zapatistas as they say... Tatic is a good person. He loves the poor. He wants peace. He fasted for many days and prayed for the peace of Chiapas. But many people do not want him because of his clear position in favor of the indigenous communities... I was next to him after Acteal and when the 45 coffins arrived he cried a lot about the massacre. He is like Moses, who cannot accompany his people until stepping into the Promised Land

(Interview 25).

Las Abejas' acceptance of religious and political pluralism reflects the inclusive character of liberation theology. Peter Beyer (1990) explains how liberal religious leaders can get around religious and political diversity if they succeed in providing "a service which not only supports and enhances the religious faith of its adherents, but can also impose itself by having far-reaching implications outside the strictly religious realm" (p.377). *Las Abejas'* inclusion of diversity is based on their indigenous liberationist discourse, based on "nonreligious" social problems recognized by people with different religious and political identities. As an Abeja Catholic catechist acknowledges:

I see a lot of potential for *Las Abejas* with its flexible and inclusive identity as a movement that is able to integrate religious diversity represented by Presbyterians, Catholics, and *Costumbristas*... This adaptation of *Las Abejas* reflects somehow the integration of political diversity. Among the majority of *Las Abejas*, generally recognized as civil society, there are a few families identified as Zapatistas of the EZLN. There are also non-politically active families who recognize themselves as Priistas. Among them there are also former paramilitaries (Interview 22).

However, liberal or conservative theologies explain people involvement in liberationist movements or in the justification of the status quo. Priistas Presbyterians, for example, recognize certain claims of liberation theology, including the Zapatista claims for land, as contrary to God's will. *Las Abejas'* claims for equality in property are illegitimate according to a Priista Presbyterian *anciano* in Pechiquil because: "The word of God is clear: those who are rich are rich and those who are poor are poor. The Bible is clear!" (Interview 64). According to an American Presbyterian missionary in the Highlands, the Presbyterian local communities themselves assume a conservative interpretation of the Bible:

The Mexican government in the 1950s asked Wycliffe people to work in

Chiapas. A stereotype developed that evangelicals support the government. This was due to an opposition movement led by anthropologists from UNAM and also during the 1960s and 1970s many people were accused of being connected to the CIA. However, it is the people themselves who picked up the interpretation from the Bible that authority is sacred, it is like God and it cannot be challenged. Local interpretations of not criticizing the government found support by the National Presbyterian Church, probably linked to the PRI government (Interview 40).

Although Protestantism reached Mexico in 1872, Presbyterian missionaries from the USA arrived in Chiapas in 1920 as they were assigned to evangelize this area in the 1914 Cincinnati Missionary Conference (Ruiz García 1996).⁴⁹ Americans from the Summer Institute of Linguistic (SIL) arrived in Chiapas in the 1940s and, although “characterized by numerous prejudices against “Indians”... [and] ambiguous ties with the government” (Interview 37), they prepared vocabularies in Tzotzil which were later used in the translation of the New Testament (Rostas 1999). The Presbyterian Church of Mexico, represented in Chiapas by missionaries of the Dutch Reformed Church, increased its presence in the 1960s, thanks also to numerous contacts made by Presbyterian missionaries from Guatemala. During the same period, those who favored a more participatory liturgical model, Pentecostals, and to a lesser degree Seventh Day Adventists, Independent Baptists and Jehovah's Witnesses, increased their presence among indigenous communities of Chiapas (SIPAZ, May 2000; Rostas 1999, 331-332). *Evangélicos* (Protestants) in Chiapas grew from 4.2 percent in the 1960s to more than 23 percent in 1999.⁵⁰ In the

⁴⁹ The beginning of the Protestant expansion in Mexico is identified in the 1910 World Mission Conference of Edinburgh. Contrary to the opinions of European Churches, United States protestant churches declared Mexico land of mission and distributed its territories for the different denominations in the 1914 Missionary Conference in Cincinnati, later confirmed by the 1916 General Congress of Panama. A strong presence of Presbyterian missionaries in Mexico was registered between 1949 and 1960. In this period, the protestant population in Mexico grew 289 percent, with 3,000 churches and 5,000 ministers. However, at the national level, Protestant presence remained an insignificant presence until recent years (Ruiz García, 1996).

⁵⁰ According to the Dutch Reformed Church missionaries I interviewed, Protestant presence in Chiapas is close to 40 percent.

municipality of Chenalhó the Presbyterian Church arrived first in Chintik in 1952 (Perez-Enriquez 1994, 190; Bonner 1999, 38). Soon a group of converted went to Yabteclum, Pechequil and Acteal 'to preach the Bible' (ibid).

Their 'religious proselytism' in addition to their challenge of traditional use of alcohol during ceremonies led numerous communities in the Highlands to expel Presbyterian families in 1989 (Kovic 1997). "Presbyterians posed a threat to non-Protestant indigenous communities in Highlands by refusing to pay *cooperación* (cooperation) often used for buying alcohol, an important source of revenue for cargo holders (Eber 1995, 254). However, the Presbyterian goals of literacy, modernization and western health programs, including their emphasis on cultural inadequacy as an explanation of their poverty, posed little threat to Mexican assimilationist policies (Gossen 1989, 223) and by the 1950s Presbyterians were working throughout Mexico with full government support. As a result, the Presbyterians in Chenalhó came to be characterized by a 'more conservative interpretation of the Bible' (Interview 41) and a political view in support of the PRI government. Priista Presbyterians commonly object the Zapatista rebellion because "The Bible says that Christians cannot rebel to government authority" (Interview 42). Often they mention St. Paul's Letter to the Romans: "Everyone must submit himself to the government authorities... God has established the existing authorities. Consequently, he who rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted..." (Romans 13, 1-2). Abejas Presbyterians, however, interpret the Bible in liberation theology terms while still remaining faithful to their identity as Presbyterians. A Presbyterian founder of *Las Abejas* explains how the message of the Word of God cannot justify oppressive systems of authority:

I am Presbyterian and Abeja. All the Presbyterians here in Tzajalchen are Abejas. We continue to be faithful to our belief and we have good relations with our pastor because when he comes we do not speak of politics. The role of the pastor

is just to preach the word of God. Certain controversial bible passages that had characterized certain PRI Presbyterian communities are interpreted here in a different way. For example Romans 13, where the Bible says we have to respect authority and the government. We believe that when a government is acting very badly it is not to be respected. The Bible also says to free the oppressed. In the story of Genesis, Adam and Eve were placed in the world to work the land... and the land is for those who work it. But the government is acting very badly by selling our lands and not giving us just conditions to sell our products... We can't continue to justify unjust institutions that oppress the people (Interview 25).

Although with a liberation theology perspective, *Las Abejas* welcome and respect religious diversity. Non-Catholic foreign human rights observers also perceived these characteristics. The distinction is not at a level of denomination but of liberation. Radical theologies and progressive religiosities find a common ground in the resistance against oppression and discrimination (see Norget 1997). Most Abejas distinguish themselves from traditional conservative Catholicism and are generally identified as radical, progressive, or liberationist Catholics as most communities of the SCLC Diocese. This religious identity reflects their personal and communitarian relations in a way that, as a CPTer commented, "living among them is like living in a huge Catholic worker house" (Interview 13). *Las Abejas* radical religious identity finds accord in the biblical message of feeding the orphans, giving a roof to strangers and acting against injustice. Such liberationist biblical interpretations are the effect of the modified role of catechists and the renewed community methods adopted in the Highlands of Chiapas.

Participation Dimension: Catechists' New Role and Method

With the 1968 diocesan evaluation, a new role of catechists, or lay preachers, as community mediators began to emerge. Several authors agree that the transformation of catechists' role in the community explains the formation of indigenous movements in the Highlands and Lacandon Jungle (Collier and Quaratiello 1994; Harvey 1998; Logorreta Díaz

1998; Tangeman 1995; Floyd 1996). The new role of catechists also explains the Mayan-traditional and Catholic-liberationist characters of *Las Abejas* religious identity. The traditional role of catechists in the Catholic Church is to oversee religious training and education. In 1960, when Bishop Samuel Ruiz García arrived in the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, this was also the role occupied by the almost 700 catechists in the various communities of the Highlands and the Lacandon Jungle. Catechists were no more than religious educators. The methods and roles occupied by the catechists at that time “ran counter to the communitarian traditions of the indigenous people” (Floyd 1996, 151). In 1961, building on a program begun by Ruiz’s predecessor, candidate catechists were asked to be trained in two centralized schools for catechists (Floyd 1996; Iribarren 1991a; 1991b). The trainings consisted of attending annual courses for a number of weeks where candidates were studying sacred scripture, dogma, canon law, liturgy and music. Once ready, they had the authority to preside over liturgies of the word over the community.

The training received by catechists in San Cristóbal, besides being clearly disrespectful of indigenous spirituality and community organization, ignored the people’s daily struggles. Bishop Ruiz recalls how during the 1968 evaluation, numerous catechists lamented how the church was distant from concrete indigenous people’s struggles:

The Church and the Word of God have told us things to save our spirits, but we don’t know how to save our bodies. During our work for the salvation of our spirit and of the spirits of others, we suffer hunger, sickness, poverty and death (quoted in Ruiz 1993, 29).

Based on the new paradigms of liberation and the option for the poor, offered by the 1968 Medellín Conference (Smith 1991, 18), Bishop Ruiz encouraged radical changes in the role and formation of catechists so that indigenous communities could reflect and act upon their

struggles.⁵¹ Charlene Floyd (1997) observes how the publication of the 1968 bilingual catechism book called *Díos Nos Ama / Díos yasc'anotic* (God Loves You) indirectly encouraged community participation. (p.105). At the time of its publication, the catechism was already outdated since it did not include the structural analysis raised by the documents of the Medellín Conference published in 1969 (Smith 1991, 162). A less defined catechism offered more freedom for community reflections with the catechist concentration on consciousness raising and social education (Carrasco 1987, 15). Such community discussions stimulated an intensive process, which continues today; to create a space for reshaping the messages of the Bible and the church's traditions into the indigenous communities' traditions, spirituality and struggle (Interviews 47 and 55). Catechists, stirred by community concerns about their social and economic situation, encouraged diocesan workers to answer people's land struggles (Harvey 1998). Consequently, catechists also received economic and political trainings in their own languages of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolabal. The community, not the parish priest, selected candidates for catechists, as in the indigenous communities custom of identifying their leaders, or cargo holders, collectively. Encouraged to act more as facilitators rather than teachers in the communities, catechists became vehicles of communication both in and out of the communities.

As the catechists' role changed, so did their numbers. In the mid 1960s, about 700 catechists covered a fairly traditional religious work for more than one million people in 36,821 square kilometers of the diocese. After 20 years, about 6,180 catechists were at work in the different sociocultural areas of the diocese. In 1999, diocesan workers said their number already

⁵¹ During the Medellín Conference, Bishop Samuel Ruiz was elected President of Mission of the Conferencia Episcopal Latino Americana (CELAM) and he served that position until 1974. His role in this field was central to shape the diocese process of "indigenization" or "autoctonization" in Chiapas and to

had grown to more than 8,000 catechists (Interview 57). In the last 30 years, catechists of the SCLC Diocese have developed prominent roles as community and political leaders in conjunctions with their religious activities and their work became the *trabajo vertebral* (vertebral work or centerpiece) of the diocese (see Floyd 1997, 103; Iribarren 1991a and MacEoin 1996). It was a consequence of the catechists' radical work for consciousness raising and organization of resistance in favor of landless and oppressed indigenous communities that the Catholic Church in the northeast of Chiapas was identified as "communist" and "liberationist" (Tangeman 1995; Logorreta Díaz 1998).

From early 1970s, Tzotzil indigenous communities of the Highlands began to employ a new method of community reflections. The previous method--'indoctrination' where the catechists were inculcating a teaching from above, called *nopteswanej*--was replaced with a participatory method that stimulated collective reflections on the meaning of scripture (Iribarren 1991a, 11). This method came to be known from the Tzeltal name *tijwanej*, which means 'to put in movement' (Tangeman 1995, 9), or "to bring out what is in another's heart" (Interview 37). After experimenting in a few communities in the Highlands and Lacandon, this method became the common pastoral method used in all the pastoral-cultural areas of the diocese. Charlene Floyd (1997) recognizes the theological rationale for this new method in "the new relation between the church and the Kingdom of God" (p.87), which made the Catholic Church a catalyst for the creation of numerous social and indigenous movements in the Highlands and Lacandon Jungle (Logorreta Díaz 1998; MacEoin 1996; Floyd 1997).

In 1978, the representative assembly of the diocese undertook a process of self-evaluation

orient Latin American churches in their relationship with the indigenous peoples of the continent (See: Smith 1991: 109, 159 and 207).

looking for “ways to make the pastoral agents conscious of their own position of class and of their closeness to or distance from the interests of the people” (Iribarren 1991a, 17). During these gatherings, the analysis of “people’s interests” functioned as a benchmark for the evaluation of the church’s ideological and political role in society. The church began admitting that, “even though the individuals who comprised it were ‘kind,’ the institution was in collusion with the exploitative system and the interests of the dominant classes” (Floyd 1997, 90). Thus, for the diocese it became clear that as a change in society required a change in the institutions; the church had to convert itself from being an exploitative institution to become a “church of the poor” (Ruiz García 1987, 30). Only by passing through this radical conversion and revision of its position with the indigenous communities as the poorest and most oppressed people in Chiapas could the church become truly “political” and “ready to accompany [the indigenous people] in their search for a new society structured on justice and fraternity” (Ruiz García 1993, 27).

Siding with the poor indigenous population, the church renewed the role of catechists and the participatory method in the community produced the most important effect among the Tzotziles of the Highlands: their *toma de consciencia* (consciousness raising) (Womack 1999, 23). Indigenous of the Central Highlands demonstrated their consciousness and capacity to organize on a regional scale in the 1974 Indigenous Congress.

Liberation Dimension: The 1974 Indigenous Congress

In 1971, the state government asked the Catholic Church to organize a conference in commemoration of the quincentennial of the birth of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas, the sixteenth century champion of indigenous rights. “Government officials liked the idea of emphasizing indigenous culture, which to them meant colorful customs, quaint music and dances, interesting food and a means to boost tourism” (Floyd 1996, 153). In addition, by promoting this initiative,

the Mexican government wanted to create a populist image after brutal repression of the student movement at the UNAM in the late 1960s (Collier and Quaratiello 1994). The government, however, did not have the necessary grassroots contacts to mobilize the indigenous communities of Chiapas. So, the organization of the congress was delegated to the Catholic Church who had already initiated an extensive grassroots work of evangelization since the coming of Bishop Samuel Ruiz. The government asked the church because “they knew it was not a political party, nor a political alternative, but a social force” (Floyd 1996, 153), essential for gaining the participation of the indigenous communities. What the government did not realize at that time, however, was how this initiative would unleash such a grassroots mobilization that it would subsequently threaten the government itself.

The Catholic Church had been present in the indigenous communities of the Diocese of San Cristóbal before any other organization. Consequently, the Church’s preexisting structures of evangelization became the appropriate channels where the indigenous demands came to be heard. The already 1,000 traveling catechists and the new participatory method in the communities provided a solid base for the intensification of networks of communication between the Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol and Tojolabal socio-pastoral areas of the diocese. Thanks to frequent community meetings, many Tzotzil people of Los Altos acquired a critical awareness of the Spanish conquests and the life of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in his attempt to give rights and dignity to the oppressed indigenous community (Harvey 1994; 1998; Collier and Quaratiello 1994). Historians, students and agronomists were invited to teach courses in Mexican history, agrarian laws, economics, and agronomy (Fox 1994, 15). The communities were asked to reflect on their current situations and circumstances while electing delegate members of their communities to participate in the discussions of the congress. The results were extraordinary, both at the

grassroots level and for the repercussions that the congress' emerging demands had on other indigenous movements and organizations.

Most studies of Chiapas movements trace the beginning of radical peasants and indigenous movement to the 1994 Indigenous Congress (Collier and Quaratiello 1994; Harvey 1994 1998; Díaz 1998; Benjamin 1989; McEoin 1996). It is important to remember that the Indigenous Congress was held at a time when indigenous people were highly discriminated against and disregarded not only by *Coletos y Ladinos*, but also by governmental and nongovernmental intellectuals (Gutiérrez 1999). Marxist political thought considering ethnicity a "false consciousness" exerted its influence on Indian oriented organizations such as PRODESCH, most of the time lead by *Ladinos* intellectuals (see: Benjamin 1996, 63-65; Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 130-131). PRODESCH, like other pro-indigenous government organizations, worked with indigenous agents to favor communication networks in the communities. However, they did not hesitate to make decisions "for" them, even imposing their own candidates for municipal office (Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 62).

On the other hand, the 1974 Indigenous Congress was an unprecedented event in the history and mobilization processes of the Chiapas indigenous movement. It was a grassroots convention designed and prepared by indigenous people that gave them the possibility to publicly encounter, reflect, and speak about their own problems and solutions. Unlike the government-sponsored indigenous and peasant organizations, which are organized top-down, the congress publicly demonstrated the efficacy of the bottom-up method used by the Catholic Church. This method of organization and decision-making was then employed by most non-governmental indigenous organizations, including the *Las Abejas* and the EZLN (Harvey 1998; Collier and Quaratiello 1994).

The congress was a sign of the church's protagonist role in the indigenous people's consciousness raising process. Several non-indigenous pastoral agents of the diocese, explain how the indigenous communities view themselves and their denunciations and resistance as a reflection of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas' prophetic work in defense of indigenous rights. As a SCLC Diocese's Vicar recalls:

During the congress one of the reflections was focused on the question "Who is Bartolomé today?" The coordinators of the congress expected the people to indicate Don Samuel Ruiz in his work to promote a theology of liberation against a theology of enslavement. But, surprisingly, the indigenous communities answered, "We are Bartolomé!" The people themselves represented the continuation of Fray Bartolomé work of liberation. They were 'the voice' defending the oppressed indigenous populations because they demanded land, health and education for all...(Interview 57).

Journalists attending the congress asked Bishop Samuel Ruiz: "How long have you been teaching these things to these Indios?"⁵² Government representatives were quite surprised to observe the indigenous people's participation, organization and the ability to reflect on current issues during the congress. Due to the number of indigenous languages used in the discussions and the demanding schedule of the congress, only indigenous people were able to fully participate. The Vicar continues:

The government tried to understand what was going on during the meetings of the congress. They even sent someone who knew indigenous languages but it was materially impossible for a non-indigenous person to follow the stressing rhythms of the meetings that were going from 8AM until 7PM without interruption (Ibid.).

The experience of the congress initiated a new enthusiasm in the Catholic communities of Los Altos and Lacandon Jungle. On the one hand, the congress confirmed the Catholic

⁵² Speech conference of Bishop Samuel Ruiz at the University of Chicago, May 22, 2000.

hierarchy's positive impact of their option for the poor, as inspired by the new perspectives of the Vatican II and then elaborated on in the liberation theology movement (Smith 1991). In the socio-cultural context of the SCLC Diocese's territory, this "option" was identified since the beginning with a gradual but radical church conversion from its European and *Ladino* position to a new site next to the indigenous communities. Such a theological, cultural, and organizational shift of the church stimulated many indigenous communities and organizations to find their best place to grow within the pastoral work of the Catholic Church.

On the other hand, the activities initiated for the preparation of the congress and the discussions emerging from the participants did not end when the congress was over. Catechists and community representatives took the social demands discussed at the congress back to the indigenous communities in the various areas. In the Central Highlands, Tzotzil communities who did not participate in the congress had the possibility to understand the discussed topics in the congress thanks to numerous printed and audiovisual documents. Those very same communities that later organized as *Las Abejas* participated in numerous courses on the history of Mayan people, Mexico, and Chiapas, and on political and economic justice (Fieldnotes, 19 July 1999). Similar to the activity promoted by catechists in the Lacandon Jungle, Catholic catechists, along with women groups' promoters, health promoters and educations promoters, developed bases of popular participation through frequent community and group meetings.⁵³

Thanks to the 1974 Congress, Tzotziles of the Highlands met with Tzeltal, Tojolabal and Chol indigenous people acknowledging their common situation of oppression and

⁵³ See: Morales Bermúdez (1992: 259-263). See also Leyva's (1994) analysis on the galvanizing effect of the Catholic pastoral work on the formation and organization of social movements in the Cañadas (canyons) regions of Las Margaritas, which later generated the EZLN movement, along with several other indigenous organizations.

marginalization. During the preparation and follow up of the congress, Tzotziles experienced a church leadership working on their side, sharing their own struggle, and helping to organize a resistance. Unfortunately, after the excitement of the congress, things did not get much better in their communities. In fact, the government responded with more land expulsions by PRI supported caciques and other government linked organizations (Butwell, Ogle and Wright 1998a; 1998b). Consequently, an indigenous leadership emerged during the 1974 Indigenous Congress openly asking nuns and priests of the diocese: "We want you to work with us. Look at our suffering. Side with us in our struggle for land. If all you have to offer is empty catechism, nothing will change. But if you are offering the Word of God, then put it into action" (Tangeman 1995). It was from this experience of open dialogue that many nuns, priests and catechists helped the struggling indigenous communities of the Highlands and Lacandon Jungle to actively resist land evictions and to form coffee cooperatives in order to better market their products.

Mobilization Dimension: The Formation of Pueblo Creyente

Before its foundation in 1992, people of *Las Abejas* found their participation in the church structure as *Pueblo Creyente* (people of believers). As Antonio Gutiérrez remembers: "Before our own organization was formed we were already socially active and organized... We were known in the church as "Pueblo Creyente" (Interview 25) This particular organizational structure was born from the diocesan concern to represent the voice of the indigenous people within the institutional structure of the church (Kovic 1997, 165). A SCLC Diocese's Vicar explains:

Pueblo Creyente is an assembly of lay representatives from the Catholic communities that have different forms of social participation such as women's groups, health promoters, education promoters, etc. They are lay Catholics who live their faith as a civil society. They are called Pueblo Creyente because the

diocese wanted to include our indigenous brother and sisters in the diocesan assembly, normally formed exclusively by priests and nuns, not even including catechists...(Interview 57).

Previous active participation of the indigenous communities was concentrated at local levels of parish assemblies held in advance of the Diocesan Assemblies. In line with the option for the poor adopted in the 1975 First Diocesan Assembly in San Cristóbal (Womack 1999), the diocese emphasized decisions that emerged at the local level where specific needs were better represented at regional (socio-pastoral areas) and community (parish) level.

But it was only during the 1991 Diocesan Assembly that pastoral workers realized that in order to decide how to construct the Church of the indigenous (the poor) it would be necessary to take their point of view within the diocesan leadership into account. As Kovic (1997) observes "it is surprising that it took sixteen years to give the poor a formal voice in the decision-making process" (p.166). But the real identity of this organization was soon transformed into a social movement when numerous participants protested the arrest of Father Joel Padrón González. A parish priest of Simojovel de Allende since 1979, Fr. Padrón was accused by the Chiapas Governor Patrocinio González Garrido of possessing illegal arms, robbery, damage of property, conspiracy and inciting peasants to take land (MacEoin 1996, 65-66). These clearly fabricated accusations were part of campaign against the diocese's promotion of "active social movements of liberation" (Smith 1991, 25) among the indigenous populations. It was also the governor's obvious reaction to Bishop Samuel Ruiz's recent accusations of "a disturbing growth of repression in Chiapas" made at the prestigious Jesuit Center for Theological Reflection (CRT) in Mexico City (Interview 20). A local newspaper, *Diario de Chiapas*, not only gave editorial approval for the arrest but also listed the name of five other priests with the same accusations (MacEoin 1996, 66).

The governor's decision to attack Fr. Padrón and the other priests of the diocese was a direct attack against the indigenous organizations demanding access to land and better working conditions on the coffee *fincas* (Kovic 1997, 166). The governor agreed to release Fr. Padrón under four conditions: (1) the pastoral workers evacuate lands that were recently taken in Chiapas, (2) the diocese emit a declaration that there were no human rights violations in his arrest, (3) that the diocese condemn the occupation of lands by campesinos, and (4) after his release Father Padrón not be allowed to preach in Mexico (Gómez and Kovic 1995). Bishop Ruiz refused these conditions but did try to stop a pilgrimage that the indigenous people of Simojovel and other communities in the Highlands were organizing on the way to Tuxtla, where Fr. Padrón was detained (Fazio 1994, 174). Many Tzotzil from Chenalhó also participated in this pilgrimage, joining more than 18,000 indigenous people marching through San Cristóbal and Tuxtla-Gutiérrez. In front of the jail, they did a nonviolent sit-in, prayer and fasted for three days. Some extended their protest to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City where during a co-celebration, Bishop Ruiz and Archbishop Miguel Perez Gil denounced how the unjust arrest was a reaction to "the work of the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas, [interpreted as] an 'annoyance' to those who wanted to see Indian and poor always as subjects, silent and exploited" (Fazio 1994, 179; Kovic 1997, 167).

Thanks to the indigenous and diocesan ability to publicly denounce this case of injustice at the national and international levels (MacEoin 1996, 66), Father Padrón was released from jail on November 6 1991. The effect of this successful experience of popular protest helped the Pueblo Creyente organization grow. It attracted members from twenty-five municipalities from the Diocese of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. *Las Abejas* who participated in this and other subsequent public activities recognized this experience as "foundation of [their] choice of

nonviolent resistance” (Interview 25). From these first successful experiences of using religious activities as public forms of protest, *Las Abejas* formulated their identity as “*creyentes y pacifistas*” (believers and pacifists) (ibid). *Las Abejas*' political claim is generally identified with the EZLN demands. However, *Las Abejas*' political identity has an essentially religious dimension embodied in the experience of *Pueblo Creyente*. The affinity of *Las Abejas* with Pueblo Creyente explains the frequent use of public prayers, fasting and processions as nonviolent means to seek social change.

Las Abejas naturally combine their religious identity with political claims and vice versa. The connection between the diocese's liberating work and the *Las Abejas*' vocation to justice is evident and difficult to separate. Nevertheless, *Las Abejas* also has its own political characteristics developed in relation to the Zapatistas and to other organizations of the civil society and numerous international NGOs. The following chapter explores the political and international character of *Las Abejas* identity and the Zapatista demands for human-indigenous rights developed during the last seven years.

CHAPTER 7:

THE POLITICAL / HUMAN RIGHTS FRAMEWORKS OF *LAS ABEJAS*

Political Framework: *Las Abejas* as a Neozapatista Movement

On October 12 1992, during the anti-Columbus day march in San Cristóbal, Tzotziles later identified as “*Las Abejas*” first encountered members of the *Comité Clandestino Revolucionario Indígena* (CCRI), the organization in charge of the Zapatista training camps in the Lacandon Jungle (Ouweneel 1996, 96). They also met a recently founded radical organization called *Alianza Nacional Campesina Independiente Emiliano Zapata* (ANCIEZ) whose members were the majority of protesters and who later joined the EZLN (Ibid.). The increasing economic and ethnic marginalization experienced by Tzotziles, Tzeltales, Choles and Tojolabales indigenous communities of Chiapas encouraged mobilization and the search for alternative political programs. The cry of ‘¡*Ya basta!*’ (Collier 1994; Harvey 1998) was in fact a call for solidarity for all those *Indígenas* and *Mestizos* who said, “enough is enough!” of economic impositions and cultural discriminations (Harvey 1998, 199). However, a popular consciousness raising already existed in Chiapas between various peasant, indigenous, and women organizations. The strength of the EZLN rebellion therefore lies less in their military resources and revolutionary programs and more in the revelation and coalition of popular discontent of excluded sectors of the Mexican (and international) civil society (Womack 1999, 44). Clearly the limited military force of the 3,000 poorly equipped EZLN succeeded in their rebellion thanks to the political opportunities presented by President Salinas’ delicate NAFTA negotiations (Schulz

1998, 54). However, the local and international network capacity of the movement made it possible for the EZLN to capture "indigenous organizational strength" (McAdam 1982) and international support (Ronfeldt et al. 1998; Cleaver 1994a).

Clearly, communication was the real intention of the 1994 Zapatista rebellion. As Subcomandante Marcos said, "We didn't go to war in January first to kill or to have them kill us... We went to make ourselves heard" (quoted in Womack 1999, 44). Most existing indigenous organizations found a voice in the Zapatista claims about their increasingly marginalized conditions (Menocal 1998). They also found themselves sympathizing with the emerging neozapatista movement (Harvey 1998), because of the communicative praxis (Melucci 1989; 1996; Touraine 1981; Eyerman and Jamison 1991), adopted by the EZLN's communiqués (Womack 1999). In their (First) Declaration from the Lacandon Jungle, the EZLN presented their rebellion as the latest expression of indigenous resistance and denounced NAFTA as "the death sentence for indigenous people in Mexico" (EZLN 1994, 40). Using poetic, sarcastic and allusive words to describe the current economic and cultural marginalization, the EZLN echoed dimensions of the Mayan cultural and religious worldviews. As a result, most of the organizations in resistance and in search of new construction of political meanings, visions, values, strategies, and identities adopted the EZLN political position. This explains why, after the EZLN public appearance in 1994, *Las Abejas* gathered together all their communities to define their political options (Hidalgo 1998, 62). During these meetings, *Las Abejas* communities recognized that they shared EZLN's demands except for the use of weapons to resolve conflicts. They decided to

⁵⁴ The Mexican government probably knew about the existence of a guerilla movement in Chiapas before the 1994 uprising. However, it is easy to imagine that the Mexican government purposely avoided any publicity about a military confrontation during the negotiations about NAFTA (see Proceso, May 11, 1997).

remain a civil movement and not take direct part in the armed resistance of the EZLN. Convinced of the importance of pushing the government for recognition of their social, political, economic and cultural rights, they found their political identity as a civil society equally essential to accomplish social change in the Highlands, Chiapas and Mexico. A member of *Las Abejas* explains their position of civil society in relation to the EZLN and in the common struggle of resistance:

Like our body has two eyes, two ears, two hands and two feet, so our social struggle has the EZLN on one side and us on the other. We conduct our part in the resistance without weapons and we do not respond to the commands of the EZLN. We are two different organizations but we are close enough because both are fighting against the government corruption that exploits us while selling our lands. We are both resisting the government's plan to form more and more paramilitaries to kill us and displace our families. We agree with them that we need land, work, democracy and justice. Yes, we want our dignity and rights as indigenous to be respected (Interview 30).

Since 1994, *Las Abejas* has supported numerous political initiatives inspired by the EZLN. In August 1994, they participated in the *Gobierno de Transición en Rebelión* (Transitional Government in Rebellion) and National Democratic Convention promoted by the EZLN. Apart from the EZLN, they also participated in the August 21, 1994 governmental elections supporting the PRD opposition party. They participated in the National Consultation for Peace and Democracy and in the Democratic State Assembly of the People of Chiapas (AEDPCH). As a delegation, they participated in the foundation of the Zapatista Front of National Liberation (FZLN) (Hidalgo 1998, 64). At the end of April 1995, numerous women and men of *Las Abejas* organization went to San Andrés Larrainzar to organize a permanent human shield to protect the EZLN during the negotiations with the government. They saw these negotiations reflecting their identity as an organization promoting nonviolent resistance and dialogue and reconciliation. For this deep conviction, they were willing to endure cold, rain and lack of sleep and food while

standing for hours as the *cinturones de paz* (belts of peace). This collective action allowed the dialogues to develop in peace.

After ten months of nonviolent protection of the negotiations, and after prolonged consultations with the indigenous civilian resisting bases, the Zapatistas and the Federal Government signed the San Andrés Accords on February 16, 1996. During the San Andrés negotiations, *Las Abejas* had the possibility to share their experiential reflections on “indigenous, rights, community and autonomy, justice for the indigenous people, political participation and representation of indigenous people, rights and culture of indigenous women, communication access and promotion and development of indigenous cultures” (Navarro and Herrera 1998, 31). *Las Abejas* knew how necessary it was to discuss these topics for the implementation of peace, justice and dignity in Chiapas. Although *Las Abejas* was less politically prepared than the EZLN, *Las Abejas* represented the consciousness raising process promoted and struggled along with the progressive SCLC Diocese during the past twenty years. The topic discussed at San Andrés Larrainzar in 1996 reflected not only the EZLN demands expressed in 1994, but also those formulated by most indigenous representatives in San Cristóbal at the end of the 1974 Indigenous Congress.

Twenty Years Later: The Same Demands

Numerous authors have recognized how the demands expressed in the 1974 Indigenous Congress reflect the political agenda of most Chiapas indigenous and peasants’ organizations in resistance (Leyva Solano 1995; Morales 1992; Collier and Quaratiello 1994; Harvey 1998; Floyd 1997; Zettler 1997; Gilbreth 1987; Benjamin 1996). Indeed, the EZLN’s ability to establish networks of communication, along with their demands for land, food, education and work, was certainly inspired by the existing sets of contacts and reflections initiated by the 1974 Indigenous

Congress. *Las Abejas* is recognized as having the same political demands as the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN). Generally, both the Mexican and the international society view their political stand as a reflection of the Zapatista claims for land, justice, democracy and dignity.

However, a correct analysis should reverse this correlation since *Las Abejas* more realistically represents the Chiapas indigenous movement shaped in large part by the socio-political consciousness raising work of the diocese during the last 40 years. From this perspective, both the EZLN and *Las Abejas* share common political characteristics identified by the pre-existing liberationist indigenous movement, which publicly emerged from the experience of the 1974 Indigenous Congress.

By convening indigenous people from different parts of Chiapas, with different languages, customs and traditions, the 1974 Indigenous Congress encouraged the formation of bridges of dialogue across diverse social contexts and cultural identities. Similar problems and common needs for change were recognized to be the main preoccupation of Tzotzil, Tzeltal, Chol, Tojolabal, Zoque and Lacandon people. The sharing of local struggles helped to establish channels of ongoing communications and to form coalitions for collective resistance. Also, the congress gave to non-Indian people of Chiapas and Mexico incontrovertible proof that indigenous communities are able to organize, share awareness and find unity even across language, ethnic and cultural differences. Clearly, the indigenous experience of analyzing their situations and expressing focused demands laid the groundwork for the creation of communication networks and community mobilization later recognized in the *Las Abejas* and EZLN organizations.

Also the experience of indigenous people creating and organizing resistance themselves without external impositions or manipulation was a characteristic of the 1974 Indigenous

Congress and later continued in the *Las Abejas* and EZLN's experiences. As Ovalle Muñoz and Pedro de Jesus observes:

The congress was critically important for the campesinos who, dancing to their own music instead of dancing to the music prepared by the state, demonstrated unity, force and palpable evidence of progressive potential, in the presence of a confused state (Muñoz and de Jesus 1984, 66).

In the aftermath of the congress, numerous indigenous organizations emerged (Benjamin 1996) representing the same basic demands for land, education, health services, work and just commerce. Eventually, many organizations engaged in organized invasions of land to concretely respond to the unfulfilled demands of indigenous participants in the congress (Morales 1992). George Collier (1994), in his study of pre-existing peasant movements, shows how similar the basic demands for land, health, services, education and food formulated in the 1974 Indigenous Congress are to the 1994 EZLN demands. This is a clear sign of the unheard voice of marginalized Chiapas who have no other choice than to rebel (pp.63-65). As indigenous representatives of the EZLN explain:

Years have passed since 1974 when we began trying to get land, dwellings, roads, rural clinics, but without any success. The only response was trickery and false promises" (*El Tiempo* [Mexico City] 5 February 1994).

Such demands continued to be unfulfilled as later were represented in a very similar form during the 1994 indigenous uprising lead by the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (EZLN). Similar to the indigenous people of the EZLN, non-PRI-affiliated Tzotzil indigenous communities in the Highlands experienced similar forms of frustration and marginalization. This explains why *Las Abejas* currently identify with the following basic socio-political demands as reproduced in the following table, comparing their original formulation in the 1974 Congress (see Morales 1992, 242-370) and later represented by the EZLN's demands (see: Collier and

Quaratiello 1994, 63-64).

Table 7.1: Common Demands of *Las Abejas* Political Agenda

DEMAND	1974 INDIGENOUS CONGRESS	1994 ZAPATISTA DEMANDS
LAND	We have problems with ranchers who invade poor people's lands... we need land, we don't have enough of it, so we have to rent it or go away to work. The lands that have been given to us are infertile. We need to be taught our rights under Agrarian Laws.	Land is for the Indigenous and peasants who work it, not for the large landlords. We demand that the copious lands in the hands of ranchers, foreign and national landlords, and other non-peasants be turned over to our communities, which totally lack land.
HEALTH	Doctors are concentrated in the city and never go to the countryside. The (government) programs of public health are not realistic.	We ask for hospitals in the municipal centers provisioned with enough medicine to attend patients, and for rural clinics.
SERVICES	We pay taxes, but don't receive even basic services such as running water.	We demand the construction of housing with basic services such as electricity, water, plumbing, and telephones.
FOOD	We all suffer from malnutrition and poverty, because of the lack of land.	Let there be an end to hunger and malnutrition, which have caused the deaths of thousands of our rural and urban brothers and sisters
EDUCATION	The education system is very poor and does not serve to improve our communities.	We demand an end to illiteracy among the indigenous communities, and for this we need better primary and secondary schools with free textbooks and university trained teachers who are ready to serve the people, not just the rich.
WORK	We are paid very unfair salaries and are forced to work from sunrise to sunset.	We demand dignified and fairly paid work for all rural and urban workers.
COMMERCE	Peasants and indigenous people work hard but are always exploited. We have to sell our products cheap	We ask for fair prices for our farm products and markets where we can freely sell and buy without being at the

but whatever we buy is expensive. For us, merchants and middlemen are like a plague of locusts.	mercy of coyotes [exploitative middlemen].
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(Source: Morales 1993, 242-370; Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 63-64).

The complete list of demands presented by the EZLN to the Mexican government included “work, land, shelter, food, health care, education, independence, freedom, democracy, justice, and peace” (EZLN 1994, 51). These demands transcend direct immediate local needs and point out the necessary changes needed at national and institutional levels. *Las Abejas* referred to the ‘Zapatista demands’ as a way to get their voice heard and indicated them as essential requirements for any change in Chiapas. As a member of *Las Abejas* from Acteal explains:

Yes, we agree with Marcos and the EZLN of the Lacandon Jungle. We are with them because these demands are ours too. Since the Indigenous Congress of 1974 we have realized our conditions and expressed our concerns. Since then we expressed our demands but they did not listen to us. Now we raise our voice and our demands with the voice and demands of the Zapatistas (Interview 29).

Retracing the common roots of *Las Abejas* and the EZLN’s contemporary political demands with the beginning of the ‘radical peasant movement’ (Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 65) in Chiapas is important to identify *Las Abejas*’ multidimensional political identity. Neil Harvey (1998) has recognized how a “complex, culturally sensitive and multistranded analysis” is essential also for the comprehension of the ‘neozapatista’ movement (p. 167). A single point interpretation of the political identity of *Las Abejas* or the EZLN does not offer an appropriate explanation and could ultimately be misleading.⁵⁵ *Las Abejas*’ political framework is explained

⁵⁵ An example of a single point investigation of the EZLN was the Attorney General’s Office (PGR) to reveal the *Mestizo* and Marxist identity of Subcomandante Marcos, identified with Rafael Sebastian Guillén Vicente, a Jesuit educated former professor at the UNAM and at the University of Nicaragua (Knudson, 1998:513).

by the combination of several elements coming from the indigenous, Mexican and international civil society (Gilbreth 1997).

Las Abejas as a Neozapatista Movement

The multilevel characteristics of the so-called 'neozapatista movement' (Harvey 1998) reflect also *Las Abejas'* emerging political identity. From the social networks of communications initiated in the 1970s and improved in the 1990s, three fundamental levels began to emerge: first, the radical indigenous and peasant organizations and communities of Chiapas identified by their religious, egalitarian, communitarian and consultative character of resistance; second, the EZLN with its racially mixed leadership, militants and autonomous bases supporting armed rebellion; and third, the numerous local, national and transnational NGOs who support the Zapatista cause (Ronfeldt et al 1998). Understanding the similarities and difference of the EZLN in relation to local indigenous organizations, national and international organizations identified as a 'global civil society' (Smith J. 1998; Frederick 1993) is crucial for our discussion about *Las Abejas'* political frameworks.

Several indigenous organizations identified with the neozapatista movement trace their origin in the 1970s growth of new organizational networks in Chiapas. *Las Abejas*, although organized in the 1990s, reflects the same agrarian issues, ethnic and religious aspects negotiated twenty years earlier. Its political identity emerged carrying the momentum generated by the activist subcultures of earlier political movements, including the work of the progressive church, radical peasant groups, the 1974 Indigenous Congress, and the experience of the Maoist organizers in Lacandon Jungle (Harvey 1994; 1998). According to McAdams (1994), all these elements "function as repositories of cultural materials into which succeeding generations of

activists can dip to fashion ideologically similar, but chronologically separate, movements”

(p.43). These elements are common to the EZLN formation too. Nevertheless, *Las Abejas* chose a political strategy distinct from the EZLN and definitely opposed by PRI communities. As the *Mesa Directiva* explains:

We, as civil organization *Las Abejas* are different from the EZLN. Although we have the same demands, the difference is that *Las Abejas* do not want to use violence, which is why we are called *sociedad civil*. The EZLN works in a different way than us. We too are involved in war and politics but with nonviolent means like papers, marches and prayers. Like the Catholic Church preaches: our weapon is the Lord... *Las Abejas* didn't know much about the EZLN before 1994 because it was formed in the Lacandon Jungle and not in the Highlands. But it was good that they came out because too many indigenous are poor. The government promises a lot but it doesn't do much. The Priistas believe the government is the owner of the land and we cannot go against it. But they don't think that Mexico is stealing energy from us, while we have to pay high taxes for the electricity. They don't think about the external debt that we have to pay while the government reduces the price of coffee to 8 pesos per kilo. They don't think about how the government only helps the communities just before the elections. All the people of *Las Abejas* know these problems because we not only keep informed, but we talk and discuss in the communities about these issues (Interview 65).

All the different radical indigenous movements in Chiapas find a common denominator in the struggle for land, dignity, democracy and indigenous rights. Therefore, an accurate analysis of today's indigenous movements of resistance should refer not exclusively to the EZLN but the neozapatista movement, which better reflects *Las Abejas*' political strategy and identity. Focusing on the neozapatista movement is essential in order to avoid partial interpretations of the EZLN as the only Chiapas resistance movement (see Claver 1994a). Showing similarities and differences between the political perspectives is also important in going beyond certain “romanticized views of resistance movements” (Roberts 1997), typically recognized in international radical movements of resistance (Frederick 1993).

In the context of the Highlands, placing radical indigenous organizations under a general 'EZLN' label creates misunderstandings and adversaries such as the Priistas against Abejas dispute that eventually led to the Acteal massacre. Further, the EZLN support base in Polhó, for example, has a more confrontational political approach compared to the EZLN of the Lacandon Jungle. Such a difference explains *Las Abejas* affinity with the '*Zapatistas de Marcos*' (Interview 25) and their difficult encounters between Abejas and Zapatista catechists. A founder of *Las Abejas* explains this difference:

Before [the] Acteal [massacre], [the Zapatista of Polhó] pressured us to join the EZLN and fight the PRI communities. But we insisted on our peaceful identity even if this created some misunderstandings with them. But even Subcomandante Marcos said that the civil society is a very important component of the struggle and their identity has to be one of peaceful movements. The Zapatistas of Polhó do not maintain many relations with the Zapatistas of the *Selva* [Lacandon Jungle]. They weren't even clear what the *propuesta Zapatista* [plan] is [...] It is not that we are against them. Our resistance is certainly similar in many ways, but we disagree with their violent approach to the conflict because it cannot give positive results. The massacre of Acteal was also a violent reaction against previous actions of violence from the Zapatistas of Polhó [...]. We have tried to dialogue with them in order to find a common line but we have the impression they want to dictate orders to everyone. But we are Abejas and not servants of their interpretation of the EZLN (Interview 25).

Diversity also characterizes the EZLN in the ethnic composition of its leadership. The representation of the EZLN as a 'purely indigenous movement' always offered a nostalgic and captivating representation that fascinated international supporters and coalitions. But the mixed ethnic origins of the EZLN's leadership offer more important messages of dialogue and synthesis. The EZLN originally conceived during a 1983 encounter of three indigenous and three mestizos in the Lacandon Jungle (Tello 1995; Gossen 1996) was later solidified into a wider network of communities and organizations created by both resisting indigenous Christians and *Mestizo*

Maoists.⁵⁶ Holloway and Peláez (1998), offer an interesting reconstruction of the coming together of the different groups and strategies that later started the EZLN rebellion. The mixed reality of the EZLN, more evident in the larger neozapatista movement, was an aspect always recognized and appreciated by the EZLN's leadership. Often, the writings of Subcomandante Marcos reflect what persecuted *Ladino* revolutionaries and marginalized indigenous resisters learned living together in the harsh mountain life of Chiapas (Bardacke and López 1995).

Subcomandante Marcos explains:

We did not propose it. The only thing that we proposed to do was to change the world; everything else has been an improvisation. Our square conception of the world and our revolution was badly dented in the confrontation with the indigenous realities of Chiapas. Out of those blows, something new (which does not necessarily mean 'good') emerged, that which today is called neo-Zapatismo (Subcomandante Marcos 1995, 25).

Initially, the EZLN attempted to stress the indigenous nature of its leadership (La Jornada [Mexico City], 27 February 1994) in order to defend themselves from the government's counterinsurgency plan to neutralize popular support by presenting the "non-Indianness" identity of the masked movement. The government depicted hard-core professional urban revolutionaries who manipulated a group of indigenous people in the Lacandon Jungle (La Jornada [Mexico City], 13 February 1994). Again, this interpretation portrayed an image of indigenous communities as passive actors, incapable of political action and organization whereas in reality,

⁵⁶ Leaders of the EZLN have admitted the pre-existing connections of some non-indigenous members of the organization with *Fuerzas de Liberación Nacional* or Forces of National Liberation (FLN), a guerrilla-style movement active in Mexico in the 1970s and 1980s. Maoist organizations, such as *Union de Pueblo* (UP) and *Política Popular* (PP), have philosophical beliefs similar to that of the liberation theology movement of the 1970s and actively helped the Catholic Church to organize the 1974 Indigenous Congress. After the repressive action of the government in 1968, the consciousness raising focus of the Catholic Church found agreement with these organizations' strategy also on organizing and avoiding direct confrontation with the government (Settler, 1997).

certain rigid Maoist ideologies and strategies were soon transformed by indigenous communities in their practices of 'waiting and listening' (Tello 1995 and Womack 1999) and making decisions in *asambleas chicas* (small assemblies) (Benjamin 1996, 235 and Harvey 1994, 21).

Subcomandante Marcos' writings and communiqués clearly convey how those cross-cultural encounters generated a new culture of political struggle. The language, stories and myths narrated around the figure of the *Viejo Antonio* (Old Antonio) represent a syncretic way of illustrating political struggle mixed with indigenous cultural wisdom (Holloway and Peláez 1998, 163).

These unique forms of communicating cultural-political struggle are the results of many years where mestizo *guerrilleros* shared with Mayan indigenous people the same food, struggles and concern about the future. The wisdom accumulated by Mayan people in 500 years of resistance, mixed with the political knowledge of a revolutionary movement, has generated a new form of political protest and a post-modern type of revolution (Holloway and Peláez 1998).

Local, national, and international NGOs⁵⁷ have been establishing important interactions and relations with *Las Abejas* contributing to the shaping of their political identity as part of the neozapatista movement. The service and advocate role of NGOs working for Central American human rights (see Smith 1996) has been active since the 1970s. However, with the advent of electronic communications the frequency and coordination of networks dramatically increased. Since its uprising, the EZLN extensively used the Internet as a way to maintain frequent international networks of communications, which created global solidarity and prevented the Mexican Army from crushing them (Frederick 1993; Ronfeldt et al. 1996). Contrary to Mexican

government accusations, even those NGOs directly linked to the EZLN did not orient their mobilization in support of a 'guerrilla revolution and the overthrow of the Mexican government' (Ronfeldt et al 1996, 48). Although characterized by different political ideologies and different degrees of militancy, most NGOs are united in supporting the defense of human and indigenous rights and the claims of democracy and self-determination of Chiapas civil society (Frederick 1993).

Las Abejas as a Civil Society

Carlos Fuentes (1996) has recognized how the critical role that the third sector of Mexican society, the so-called *sociedad civil* (civil society), plays an important part in the country's future. Organizations of the civil society can bridge the gap between the 'Modern Mexico' and the 'Revolutionary Mexico.' In particular, Fuentes sees the role of civil society as indispensable in balancing the liberal economy with social justice, between the market economy [and] social commitments (pp. xii-xiii and 137). In Chiapas, the Spanish term "sociedad civil" identifies those sectors of the population that generally oppose state and capital power and sympathize with the EZLN. However, the organizations of the *sociedad civil* do not identify themselves as autonomous bases and claim a neutral position regarding the armed conflict (Yúdice 1998). In Chenalhó, members of *Las Abejas* call themselves *sociedad civil* and are generally identified as '*los civiles*' (those of the civil society) (Fieldnotes, 15 July 1999). Thanks to the SCLC Diocese's socio-pastoral work, the *Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres*'

⁵⁷ The term NGOs includes many nonprofit organizations (NPOs), private voluntary organizations (PVOs), and grass-roots organizations (GROs). It does not include international governmental organizations (IGOs) and what are sometimes referred to as government-organized NGOs (GONGOs), government-inspired NGOs (GINGOs), and quasi-NGOs (QUANGOs) (see: Ronfeldt, Arquilla and Fuller and Fuller, 1998:35).

(CODEMU) women promotion, and the Fray Bartolomé Human Rights Center's (CDHFBC) support, members of *Las Abejas* found in being *sociedad civil* their own political space of reflection and questioning of the status quo. As one of *Las Abejas* founders explains, their political stance as *sociedad civil* came from a consciousness raising process:

When the EZLN started the rebellion in 1994, we as *Las Abejas* declared ourselves to be civil society and decided not to join the military group of the Zapatistas but to continue our resistance as a pacifist group... Thanks to FRAIBA and several local and international NGOs, *Las Abejas* had many courses about laws and land rights. With this help we now can better understand the meaning and purpose of being civil society... While we do not use weapons in our resistance, we agree with the *propuestas* of the EZLN because we are oppressed in the same way. We are coffee producers but we do not get any money from our work. We don't have roads, clinics, or houses with electricity... The struggle of the Zapatistas is necessary because thousands of indigenous people are poor and our conditions are getting worse (Interview 25).

Las Abejas recognize their role as essential in supporting the EZLN and ultimately continuing in their resistance against hegemonic powers. Although the concept of civil society has been changing with the globalization of production, Chiapan identities and strategies remain linked to Antonio Gramsci's intuitions on the crucial role of a 'consciousness raising' in relation to civil society and identity (see: Cox 1999, 15-16).⁵⁸ The EZLN's leadership believed that the revitalization of civil society could be a response to globalization and ultimately representing the beginning of a new form of doing revolution (Holloway and Peláez 1998; Ronfeldt et al. 1998).

⁵⁸ For Gramsci 'consciousness' was not directly derived from class, as for Karl Marx. Rather he identified three levels of consciousness. The lowest form was what Gramsci called 'corporative' and identified those sectors of the population directly concerned with their material needs without challenging the status quo. The intermediate level was class-consciousness, which unifies various forms of corporate consciousness from workers to bourgeois. The highest level of consciousness was the hegemonic-consciousness that would transcend class-consciousness by incorporating interests of excluded sectors of the population (e.g. peasants, indigenous, women). The formation of this third level of consciousness is therefore directly linked to gender, ethnic, religious and national identities, fundamental ingredients of New Social Movements. For further explanations see Norberto Bobbio (1988).

The Mexican Army, which by the end of 1999 had about 70,000 soldiers stationed predominantly around Zapatista autonomous bases, could have easily crushed the 3,000 or so poorly armed EZLN militia. However, Mexican generals knew that even repressing the approximate 300,000 people identified as Zapatistas would not stop the neozapatista movement, which was mainly composed of *sociedad civil* organizations. Official data shows that the civil population supporting the EZLN in Chiapas exceeds 1.3 million people (Nadal 1998).

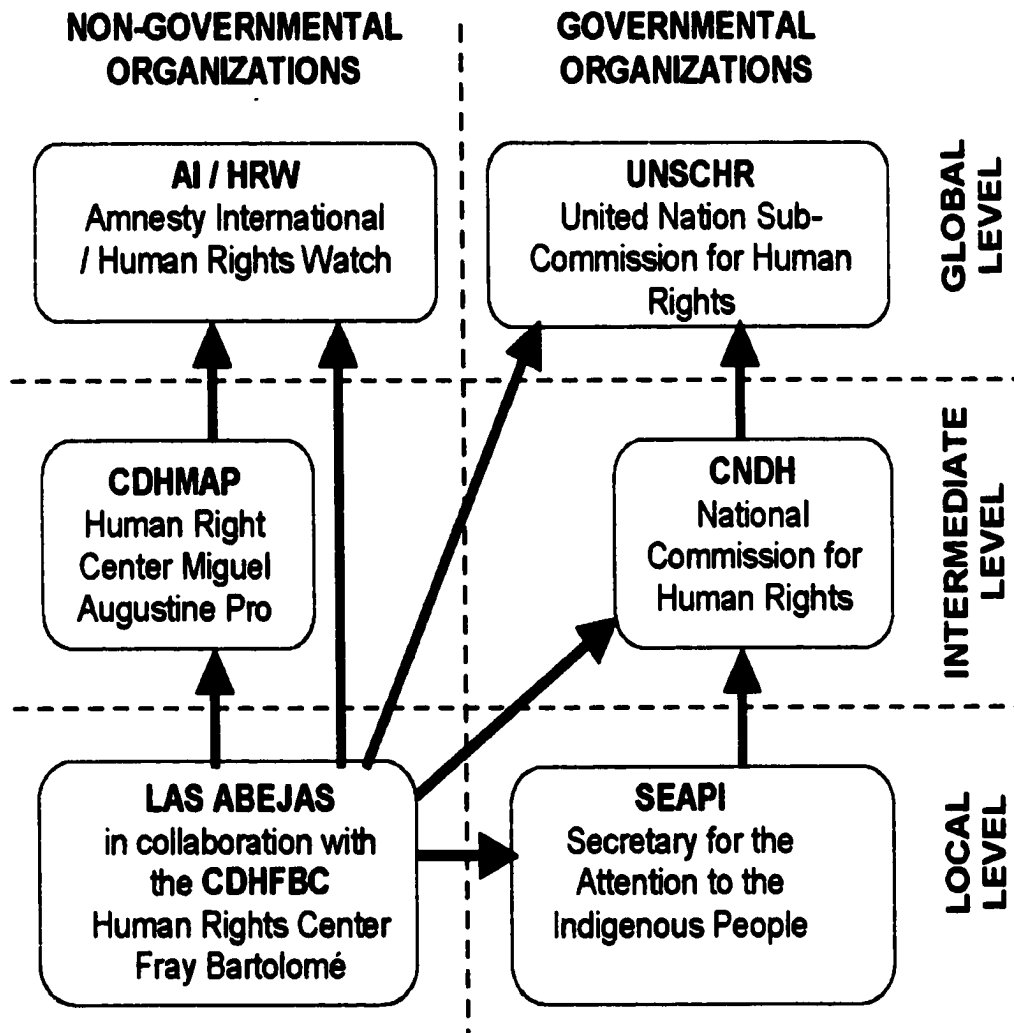
The neozapatista movement represents an innovation of the top-down tactics and strategy of other independent peasant groups (Zettler 1997, 95). The new movement drew heavily from the organizational structure, tactics and cultural identities of numerous indigenous and peasant factions (Collier and Quaratiello 1994, 81). The result was a social movement organization that placed the task of organizing and recruiting in the hands of the movements' indigenous base. In addition, the EZLN rebellion heavily relied on the resistance efforts of numerous peasants and indigenous movements of the *sociedad civil*. When the EZLN published the Fourth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle and declared the formation of a Zapatista Front of National Liberation (FZLN), *Las Abejas* decided to join the civil "front" during a general assembly (Hidalgo 1998, 64). However, the regional direction of the EZLN responded to their decision by suggesting that they remain as they are since "their participation in the resistance as a civil society was very important" (Ibid).

The EZLN armed rebellion is complementary to the nonviolent resistance of the *sociedad civil*. The strength of the EZLN has been recognized as being "not in the iron of their weapons but in their capacity to give voice to their demands and their capacity to mobilize people in Chiapas and in the world" (Interview 17). The choice to take up arms was strategically important to make the indigenous people's cry for land and dignity heard at the national and international

level. The 1994 initial media attention around the armed Zapatista rebels and the charismatic figure of Marcos functioned as a ringing bell to capture the attention of many other nonviolent resistance movements of the civil sector of Mexican society (Ronfeldt et al. 1998; Gossen, 1996; Cleaver 1998; Froehling 1997).

It is therefore understandable how *Las Abejas* and other nonviolent local and international NGOs did not perceive the EZLN's choice of violent rebellion as a contrast to their efforts of resistance. As several *Las Abejas* said, "Those who rebelled are our sisters and brothers, their cause is our cause, even though we have not chosen the path of violence" (Interview 65). Both *Las Abejas* resisters and Zapatista rebels know the importance of taking up arms in order to capture media and political attention. As an indigenous man commented to a journalist: "Sir, I have not taken up arms, nor have many other indigenous people. But I ask you: would you be still talking to me if no one did? Are we finally going to be heard, now that some indigenous people have rebelled, or are we going to have to wait another 500 years?" (Quoted in Ruiz 1998, 101).

As the EZLN constructed their communicative praxis around reflections and initiatives 'For Humanity and Against Neoliberalism,' (EZLN 1996 and 1998), *Las Abejas* and the indigenous, Mexican and international civil society established frequent intense networks of communication around human rights issues (Ronfeldt et al. 1998, 36).

Figure 7.1: *Las Abejas'* Human Rights Networks of Communication

(Source: Fieldnotes and various interviews, December 1999)

Human Rights Framework: *Las Abejas* as an Indigenous Rights Movement

The growing importance of human rights and indigenous rights is significant in order to explain the construction of *Las Abejas'* collective identity. In Mexico, human rights NGOs grew

in number from only four in 1984 to more than two hundred in 1996 (CNDH, quoted in Ronfeldt et al. 1998, 37). National and international networks of communication around Latin American social, political and economic rights began to expand by the mid 1980s (Sikkink 1993). At the same time, the indigenous rights network began to expand as numerous intercontinental encounters reasserted indigenous rights to cultural identity, self-determination and autonomy.⁵⁹ In particular, the NGO alternative meetings organized parallel to the UN sponsored conferences in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, Vienna in 1993, and Cairo in 1994 strengthened numerous networks of resistance that later directed their effort in support of the indigenous people of Chiapas (Spiro 1995). International networks made it possible to transform negative realities of human rights violations into strength for the indigenous communities and organizations of Chiapas (Brysk 1996). Thanks to the support of these numerous movements, *Las Abejas'* local experience and knowledge has been catapulted into the global arena changing the slogan 'act locally and think globally' into 'think locally and act globally' (Varese 1991).

The international community has recognized human rights violations against indigenous people of Chiapas even more critically because they affect not only their civil, political, social and economic rights, but also their cultural identity and existence as a people. Acknowledging how governmental and nongovernmental organizations can pressure the Mexican state around the issue of human and indigenous rights, *Las Abejas*, similarly to the EZLN and the SCLC Diocese with the CDHFBC, focus their communicative praxis around human rights issues and values. In particular, *Las Abejas'* inclusion of indigenous rights as part of their collective identity explains

⁵⁹ See the reflections that came from the First Continental Encounter of Indigenous Peoples in 1990 in Ecuador and with the formation of the Continental Coordinating Commission of Indigenous Nations and Organizations (CONIC) at the meeting in 1991 in Panama.

the internationalization of their actions of resistance.

The concept of respect for indigenous rights is revolutionary in Chiapas. Until 1994, indigenous people had to look down when passing by a *Ladino* person. If they were walking on the high, narrow sidewalks of San Cristóbal, “they had to step off the sidewalk on to the street in order to give priority to the non-indigenous person” (Interviews, 45). The word “rights” does not exist in Tzotzil. For their dialogues, Tzotzil communities of *Las Abejas* had to borrow the Spanish word “*derechos*.” Yet, they clearly recognize the connection of their culture with their rights and identity as indigenous people. As one of *Las Abejas* founders told me: “When we speak of Mayan culture, we renew our identity and recognize our rights as indigenous people” (Interview 26).

Las Abejas came to be internationally known during the 1994 Zapatista uprising as the victims of the largest human rights violations. The 1997 Acteal massacre was the circumstance that drove *Las Abejas* into the middle of a national and international movement for human and indigenous rights (see Stephen 1999a; Yanes 1999 and Brysk 1996). *Las Abejas'* organization is aware that human and indigenous rights are strategic values for framing their demands in global terms. In other words, human rights are a frame that allows communication between the local with the global and vice versa. Working against the government’s strategy of localizing and isolating a conflict, *Las Abejas* resist by directly communicating at the regional and international levels. Through these direct networks of communication, local episodes of human right violations are reported to regional and international organizations, which often represent the only form of protection against the violence of state and other powerful agents. As Michael Kearney (1995) states:

Numerous indigenous groups have been able to reframe their disadvantaged

relationship with the nation-state that encompasses them by redefining their projects in the global space of environmentalism and human rights... and by defining their problems in terms of violations of their human rights, many indigenous groups have been able to gain support from the international human rights movement, which is able to pump pressure on renegade states that abuse indigenous people (p. 560).

Since its foundation, *Las Abejas*' limited structures of communication have been integrated with the support of the Diocesan Human Rights Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (CDHFBC). The center was founded on March 19, 1989, as a concrete answer to the indigenous communities' demands for justice and respect of human dignity (Morquecho 1999). *Las Abejas* needed the assistance of the CDHFBC for two main reasons. First, they needed juridical assistance to defend the rights of the families of the victims as well as quantify the material damages to displaced families. Second, *Las Abejas*' denunciation of human rights violations needed to be networked at state, national and international levels. Today, the CDHFBC still plays an important mediating role between *Las Abejas* and numerous national and international governmental and non-governmental organizations working for human rights. However, as *Las Abejas* increased their own public relations, they were able to establish direct links of communication with national and international organizations.

In the past three years, *Las Abejas* entered into a worldwide network of communication with national and international NGOs, mostly working around issues of human and indigenous rights. Through the CDHFBC, the SCLC Diocese, and local NGOs, *Las Abejas* was able to establish several contacts with American, Canadian and Mexican NGOs. As a result of the international reaction to the Acteal massacre, *Las Abejas* acquired new opportunities to place their claims for justice and respect for human rights at global level. Stimulated by numerous visits of international human rights observers, delegations, and trip outside of Chiapas, *Las Abejas*'

original local concerns were soon connected to global concern such as human rights, nonviolence, justice and dignity. In 1998, prevented by the Mexican government to exit the country, *Las Abejas* sent a letter in response to the receive invitation to speak at the Conference on Economic, Ethnic and Racial Inequalities in Melbourne, Australia. These words clearly demonstrate *Las Abejas*' conscious attempt to make a 'single earth' bridging international differences and resist human rights violations:

Compañeros y compañeras, brothers and sisters of the five continents of the world, brothers and sisters of the American continent, brothers and sisters of the European continent, brothers and sisters of the Asian continent, brothers and sisters of the African continent, brothers and sisters of Oceania, we want to send a greeting to all of you on the part of the Organization *Las Abejas* of the community of Acteal, municipality of Chenalhó, Chiapas, Mexico. To you that are gathered in Australia and that come from different parts of the world, of different languages, of different races, different cultures and different ethnicities. It doesn't matter the race and the color of the skin. What is more important is to unite among all the people of the world, among different countries, so that we can share a common road, bringing together our different thoughts and ideologies. So that we may form a single heart, a single unity against torture, violence, impunity and death, to build a world of peace...⁶⁰

The international networks of solidarity and resistance are developed around a larger definition of human rights. *Las Abejas* and the indigenous people of Chiapas remind us that the 'Western' definition of human rights, as expressed in 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, are mostly individual and civil-politically oriented.⁶¹ Along with the critique of several

⁶⁰ Letter of Las Abejas to the participants of the *II Conference Economic, Ethnic and Racial Inequalities*. Melbourne, Australia: September 21, 1998.

⁶¹ For critiques of human rights formulation as ethnocentrically Western, see the documents that emerged during the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna. Many cultures and nations have recognized that regional, historical, cultural and religious differences should be taken into account in human rights standards. Among numerous studies on this subject see: Jack, Donnelly. 1992. "Human Rights and Human Dignity: An Analytic Critique of Non-Western Rights and Conceptions. *American Political Science Review* 76: 303-316; John Kelsay and Summer Twiss. 1994. *Religion and Human Rights*. New York: The Project on Religion and Human Rights.

non-Western scholars, many indigenous groups have also recognized the fundamental importance of social, economic, collective and cultural rights (see Donnelly 1992; 2000). However, *Las Abejas* and the other organizations of the neozapatista movement realize how difficult the respect of basic economic and cultural rights will be under the current global economic system with Mexico's neoliberal reforms (Brysk 1996). With the negotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s, the human rights situation in Mexico, primarily civil and political rights, were considered an important element for the transition to democracy (Rochlin 1997; Awang 1997).

The specific contribution of *Las Abejas* to the current debate on human rights, however, is in relation to their religious and cultural identity. Christine Marie Kovic's (1997) work on the human rights work of the SCLC Diocese in the Highlands represents a very important contribution to understanding the construction of identity and action around human rights and religious frames. The diocese's theological rationale around liberation theology themes explains the constitution of the CDHFBC and the defense of displaced people. However, it does not explain how Tzotzil indigenous communities organize their resistance around the respect for human and cultural rights. Although the CDHFBC works closely with Tzotzil indigenous communities, their perspective on human rights is clearly more political and juridical. *Las Abejas*' perspective on human rights as a non-governmental indigenous organization better reflects the Tzotzil cultural and religious worldview of rights (see: Orantes García 1999). *Las Abejas*' cultural and religious view of human rights is something unique that is not perceived by national and international non-indigenous human rights organizations. As Father Pedro Arriaga, a Jesuit parish priest of Chenalhó observes:

The religious dimension of *Las Abejas* is not separable from reality and it is a

fundamental part of their view of human rights. The Column of Infamy, for example, [a sculpture] placed in Acteal by a Danish artist to signify the horror for the government violation of human rights, does not only hold this meaning for *Las Abejas*. For them, it becomes a symbol of their unity as a people in resistance who cannot be defeated even if they are killed. Furthermore, the column has a sacred meaning beyond its social and cultural symbolism. It represents the sacredness of the land of Acteal where their martyrs are buried... For *Las Abejas*, human and indigenous rights are always mingled with their spiritual worldviews (Interview 19).

Las Abejas identify the indigenous claim for self-determination as an essential dimension for the respect of human rights in Chiapas (Burguete 1999). They support Polhó and other EZLN autonomous communities as expressions of the indigenous rights discussed in the signed in the 1996 San Andres Peace Accords.⁶² The repeated request to implement the signed accords also follows *Las Abejas* resistance against the *Indigenist* approach and their request for the redefinition of the relationship between indigenous people and the Mexican state (Stephen 1999a, 23). The Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture (Navarro and Herrera 1998) reflect most of *Las Abejas*' and Zapatista's demands in the areas of indigenous rights and cultural autonomy. Drawing upon Luis Hernandez Navarro's (1998, 31) discussion on human rights, six fundamental prepositions are central to our discussion:

1. Recognition of Indigenous people in the Constitution, including the right to self-determination within the constitutional framework of autonomy.
2. Broader political representation and participation, the recognition of their economic, political social and cultural rights as collective rights.
3. A guarantee of full access to justice. Access to the legal system and recognition of indigenous normative systems. Respect for difference.

⁶² An English translation of the second documents of the San Andrés Accords is available in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Spring 1999. The original text of the San Andrés Accords in Spanish can be found at <http://spin.com.mx/~floresu/FZLN/dialogo/acuerdo.htm>. For an extensive analysis of the complete Accords themselves and related documents, see Luis Hernandez Navarro and Ramon Vera, eds. *Los Acuerdos de San Andrés* (Mexico City: Era, 1998).

4. Promotion of the cultural manifestation of indigenous peoples.
5. Promotion of their education and training, respecting and building of traditional knowledge.
6. Increased production and employment opportunities. Protection of indigenous migrants.

The unfulfilled San Andres Agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture remains the best description on the meaning of indigenous rights in Chiapas (Navarro and Herrera 1998). Although signed by both the EZLN and the federal government in 1996, the Mexican government never fulfilled them. Evidently, the agreements represented a tremendous threat and contradiction to the political and economic agenda of neoliberalism (EZLN 1996; 1998). The implementation of the San Andres Agreements would give, not only the indigenous people of Chiapas but the more than 12 million Indígenas in Mexico, the power of self-determination and political, economic and cultural autonomy (Leyva Solano 1999 and Burguete 1999). It would represent a historic and unprecedented step toward a redefinition of the relationship between the Mexican state and indigenous people. The rights to self-determination would inevitably lead to broader participation of indigenous people in policymaking (Leyva Solano 1999). The agreements would also give the indigenous people the right to control their lands and their natural resources as well as their rights to nurture and implement their diverse cultures, histories and languages.

Las Abejas understood what was at stake during these accords. That is why they chose to be on the frontline accompanying the dialogues from October 1995 to February 1996. Women and men of *Las Abejas* were visible in their endurance holding a cord and forming a human shield (*cordones humanos de paz*) around the negotiation sites. Enduring rain and cold nights, *Las Abejas* continued to protect these important dialogues. They knew the subject of the dialogues was more than a solution for the EZLN. The negotiations presented a possible end to the

economic, political and cultural oppression, marginalization and exploitation of indigenous peoples that colonization has brought to the Americas.

Even though the accords do not directly deal with the issue of land, they represent the diverse aspirations and distinctions of indigenous groups (Navarro 1998).⁶³ The legislative proposal following the accords was elaborated by the National Commission for Concord and Pacification (COCOPA) in collaboration with the National Intermediation Commission (CONAI) and endorsed by the EZLN. However, the Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo rejected it in December 1996, stating that such a legislative proposal would have resulted in “the creation of a system of reservations and the balkanization of the country” (Stephen 1999a, 24). He also observed how “Mexico’s Indians should not be granted ‘special rights,’ but should be given the same rights as all Mexicans” (ibid). Until the end of his presidency on December 1st 2000, Zedillo’s government refused to accept the signed San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. Rather he increased militarization and repression, which eventually culminated a year later in the Acteal massacre (see Castro and Hidalgo 1999a).

The Mexican government not only failed to respect the signed agreement, but it engaged in a visibly brutal campaign to repress the autonomous communities which resulted in numerous documented human rights violations (Acosta-Ortiz 1998; CDHFBC 1998a; Castro and Hidalgo 1999b). Many studies have recognized these events as violations to the basic ‘right to have rights’ (Harvey 1998) and the ‘rights to identity’ (Breedy and Vicente 1998).

The Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture demonstrate that indigenous people exist,

have their own identity and demand their rights (Navarro and Herrera 1998). Both the documents and the process that produced the accords is a modern testimony that indigenous people are not “just living relics of the globalized future” (Navarro 1991, 31), but social and political actors with a project for the multi-cultural future of humanity. *Las Abejas*’ people, even with a similar cultural background, set an example for the organization’s ability to create coalitions, establish dialogue and include diversity. Referring to them as indigenous makes us understand that Mexico, as well as the world, needs to recognize their cultural diversity and respect differences. As Bishop Samuel Ruiz observes:

So what could be a solution for the respect of indigenous cultural identities and rights? The dialogue on indigenous rights and culture ended with the San Andres Agreements. The government signed them but doesn’t respect them. Some NGOs propose a reference to indigenous people in the Mexican Constitution. But indigenous people are not a minority. Here the indigenous people are real and more important than a piece of paper because they existed as people much before the Mexican Constitution. What we need is a declaration that Mexican is multiethnic, that our identities and our rights of indigenous, *Mestizos* or *Ladinos* need to be equally respected (Interview 61).

Indeed, the respect of indigenous cultural identities and rights, as repeatedly stated in the San Andres Accords, is essential for the construction of a pluralist society. However, many challenges are included in it. For instance, the meaning of the terms “*usos y costumbres*” (customs and traditions), considered central ingredients for the rights of indigenous cultures, could be in contradiction with women rights (Collier 1995; Kovic 1997; Castillo and Stephen 1999). Indigenous traditions and practices, identified as rights in relation with other cultures, can

⁶³ The arguments related to the reform of Article 27 were supposed to be discussed in the other tables of dialogue around political reform, economic development, and land reform. On March 21, 1996, the talks for the second table ‘Democracy and Justice’ began in San Andrés, but they were soon interrupted by the government representatives who refused to consider the issue beyond the “local” and by the increasing repression against Chiapas indigenous and campesinos groups (see Paulson 1998).

also be used to justify human rights violations within the community. Hernandez Castillo (1998), for example, compares different cases of human rights violations against Tzotzil women. Government repression of women's resistance initiatives through rape and 'sexual torture' (p.139) is accompanied by 'familiar repression' exemplified by tradition-justified domestic violence (pp.136-137). In a 1994 meeting, indigenous women have pointed out the need to change those customs and traditions that deny women their rights:

The customs that we have should not do harm to anyone... Violence [to women] is not good. ... They were the customs from earlier times, but we also have to change. When we do not want to marry, it is better that we talk with our parents and the man; marriage should not be forced because it ruins the women, worse if there are children later. We do not like the customs that men drink [too much] because then they scold or beat their wives, or spend the money needed for food.... We do not want bad customs (El Grito de la Luna 1994, 31).

At a time when indigenous customs and traditions are considered essential for the promotion and respect of cultural rights in Chiapas, indigenous women are not voices of dissent but of direction. Their contribution is focusing the community discernment between good and bad customs: "We have to reformulate our customs. The law should protect and promote only the actions and customs examined by the communities and organizations if they are good" (ibid). Women of *Las Abejas*, the EZLN and numerous other organizations of the Civil Society, agree to assert "their rights to maintain cultural differences, while at the same time, demanding the right to change those traditions that oppress and exclude them" (Castillo and Stephen 1999).

The legislative proposal formulated by COCOPA and CONAI following the signing of the San Andres Accords recognized women's rights as integrated into the respect of indigenous rights, "[Indigenous peoples] have the right... to apply their own normative systems in the regulation and solution of internal conflicts, respecting individual rights, human rights and the dignity and integrity of women (quoted in Castillo and Stephen 1999, 51).

“Women’s rights with dignity” is the message that *Las Abejas* women want to share with the rest of the world (Interview 31). When on July 21 and October 22, 1999, Ms. Asma Jahangir and Mary Robinson, respectively the Extra Judicial Arbitration Executor and the High Commissioner of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights, visited Chiapas, *Las Abejas* women shared a symbolic gesture with them. They dressed the visitors in their own huipiles, a symbol of their cultural and suffered identity. Female victims in the Acteal massacre wore it. This gesture expressed *Las Abejas*’ determination to extend their ‘local’ identity to the international community to gain the respect for indigenous rights. *Las Abejas* considered these visits important for they represent crucial international support for them and Chiapas. After meeting with the survivors for two hours, the organization *Las Abejas* gave Ms. Robinson a letter addressed to the United Nations. They appealed to the United Nations to intervene in resolving the conflict in Chiapas, because, they said, “we think the solution is no more in the hands of our governors” (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 22 October 1999). *Las Abejas*’ struggle for economic, cultural, religious, political and human rights reflect the global claim for respecting diversity and honoring human dignity.

Las Abejas has been developing their focus on human rights in relation to numerous international organizations. In particular, thanks to the frequent presence of international visitors and human rights observers, *Las Abejas* was able to establish dialogues about local and global struggles of resistance. Human, indigenous and women’s rights, along with their nonviolent identity constituted important themes for establishing international relations and collaborations. The following chapter analyzes in detail the role of international presence for the development of *Las Abejas*’ collective identity and action of nonviolent resistance.

CHAPTER 8:

LAS ABEJAS' CONSTRUCTION OF NONVIOLENT RESISTANCE

On January 3, 1998, just a few days after the Acteal massacre, *Las Abejas* from the refugee camp of Xoyep faced one of their most courageous acts of nonviolent resistance. About 200 Abejas, mostly women and children, surrounded fifty Mexican soldiers who were attempting to establish a military camp in their community. In reaction, the Mexican Army mobilized about four hundred Anti-riot Military Police armed with electric shields, tear gas and supported by a Public Security Police helicopter (La Jornada [Mexico City], 4 January 1998). The plan of the army was clear: to establish a military base at the strategic outlook of Xoyep, the second largest refugee camp in the municipality of Chenalhó.

The *Las Abejas* organization had expressed publicly on three different occasions their refusal to allow militaries in a '*campamento civil por la paz*' (civil camp for peace). As the militaries attempted to plant their tents near the only source of water of the refugee camp, *Las Abejas'* women – many of them with children on their backs – surrounded the army within minutes. For about four hours *Las Abejas* formed a human chain to push back the military. The soldiers, in turn, hit the Indigenas who shouted things like, "Away with the army, you are useless here!" and "Women rapists, go away!" (Ibid.). Similar to the nonviolent resistance of other Zapatista communities, *Las Abejas* women chose to be the first line of resistance, followed by the children and the men. When a Mexican Army helicopter tried to land, *Las Abejas* women ran

under it, shouting, "If you want to land here do it... but it will be on our bodies."⁶⁴ During the confrontation, *Las Abejas* reclaimed their land singing: "*Chiapas, Chiapas no es cuartel, fuera el ejercito de el*" (Chiapas, Chiapas is not a military quarter; Army, get out.)

Clearly the patience of the army was over tested. However, they could not do much due to the presence of national and international observers for human rights and journalists and photographers from *La Jornada* newspaper. With any attempt to convince *Las Abejas* of a benevolent military presence vanishing, the military police commandant asked to speak with their leader. Unanimously, the community responded, "Here are the leaders--all of us!" (Interview 28).

Although *Las Abejas* formally denounced this event to Jorge Madrazo Cuéllar, the Attorney General of the Republic, and requested that the Mexican Army leave their community, three days later at dawn, the military installed a camp two kilometers from the community. The photos and videos recorded in Xoyep spread around the world, symbolizing the courageous nonviolent resistance of the indigenous people of Chiapas. This episode represents an important stage in *Las Abejas*' development of nonviolent identity and collective actions of resistance.

The goal of this chapter is to highlight how the cultural, religious, political and human rights frameworks of *Las Abejas*' identity come together in their nonviolent resistance as the organization's most important dimension. Particularly, this chapter introduces nonviolent resistance not just in its moral significance but also as a political contention transformed by *Las Abejas*' cross-cultural relationship with human rights observers. The presence of campamentistas coordinated by the CDHFBC and the accompaniment of Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) have contributed to *Las Abejas*' formulation of resistance at local, national and international

⁶⁴ Recorded dialogue between Bishop Samuel Ruiz and 1987 Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Mariede McGuire in visit to Chiapas from Northern Ireland.

levels.

Furthermore, the delicate presence of international people in the refugee communities of Chenalhó has been an important support for *Las Abejas* women in their struggle of resistance within their families and communities. Within the organizations, women are the most courageous resisters as survivors of the Acteal massacre. Survivors are characterized by courageous emotions of resistance, and collectively participating in nonviolent actions. This is part of their healing process. Their actions and identity as nonviolent resisters find strong connections with other nonviolent organizations and persons like Mahatma Gandhi. However their primary identity is associated with their own history as Mayan resisters and in their collective memory of past expressions of resistance in Chiapas and the Highlands. Influenced by the work of the diocese, the EZLN's resistance, and the accompaniment of numerous national and international NGOs, *Las Abejas* has demonstrated a peculiar ability to construct its own identity and strategies of nonviolent resistance. While integrating suggestions and examples, *Las Abejas* has arrived at a unique reconciliatory dimension of resistance as demonstrated by the integration of former paramilitaries into their organization.

Nonviolent Resistance as Political Contention

During the 1980's, much of the academic attention was directed at microcosms of popular resistance that James Scott called "weapons of the weak". Perhaps as a reaction to the unsuccessful dramas of large-scale revolution promised in the 1960's and 1970's, these studies were centered on everyday acts of resistance by Indigenous, peasants, workers and other subaltern groups. However, as the old dreams of total transformation through armed rebellion might have been fading in recent years, resistance was associated with only passive resistance. The "hidden transcripts" (Scott 1990) of the Chiapas indigenous groups in resistance are the

actual cultural and historic context beyond a “critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant” (ibid, xii). *Las Abejas*’ nonviolent resistance is an open political contention complementary to the armed Zapatista rebellion and supported by numerous national and international people and organizations resisting neoliberalism.

Today, resistance to neoliberalism, or globalism (Beck 2000), is an emergent but also ambiguous concept (Mittelman 2000). The term ‘resistance’ is applied interchangeably to describe national or transnational movements that challenge, protest, oppose, or present alternative realities against hegemonic projects of neoliberalism (Bedoy 1992; Zermeño 1997). Nevertheless, it is clear that the global imposition of the market, political structures and cultural forces recognized as globalization-from-above correspond to an increasing international resistance movement identified as globalization-from-below (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000; Butwell Ogle and Wright 1998a). Increasing networks of communication between local, national and international NGOs have been creating new dynamics of resistance to globalization that do not necessarily indicate an exclusion to modernity. The EZLN, often mentioned as a post-modern resistance movement to globalization (Castells 1997), uses the Internet—one of the modern expressions of globalization—to form international coalitions and maintain communication with the world. *Las Abejas*, although public in its resistance, deeply reflects hidden forms of indigenous resistance. In their cultural identity, deeply rooted in the Mayan history of resistance, and in their strategies of resistance, built through intense networks of solidarity, *Las Abejas* opens the door to further investigation on other hidden identities and non-public strategies of resistance to globalization. As James Mittelman (2000) observes:

There are numerous illustrations of more localized resistance, including the Zapatista armed uprising among the Mayan Indians against the Mexican government’s neoliberal reforms, a struggle in which the rebels quickly turned to

modern technologies, including the Internet, to rally transnational support. But it would be facile to conceptualize resistance only as declared organized opposition to institutionalized economic and military power. One must dig deep to excavate the individual and collective activities that fall short to open opposition. To grasp resistance to globalization, one must also examine the subtexts of political and cultural life, the possibilities and potential for structural transformations (p. 166).

Whether resistance is explained as 'counterhegemony' (Gramsci 1971), 'countermovement' (Melucci 1985; 1989; 1996) or 'infrapolitics' (Scott, S. 1985; 1989; 1990), *Las Abejas'* resistance is characterized by a clear nonviolent option. *Las Abejas'* cultural, religious, political and human rights frameworks, characteristics of their collective identity and actions, converge in their option for nonviolent resistance. In particular, the intersection of the cultural-religious with the political-human rights dimensions explains how, for *Las Abejas*, nonviolent resistance is both a moral choice and a form of direct action. According to Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), nonviolent resistance belief put into practice is the best synthesis between faith and action (Jack 1994, 313-316). He also advises that nonviolent resistance could become a "force more powerful" to the extent that it not only takes a stand for nonviolence but it becomes a strategy for action (Ibid.). Translated into the context of Chiapas, this means that the moral commitment of *Las Abejas* and other organizations to nonviolent resistance is also a strategic dimension and one of many forms of "contentious politics" (McAdam and Tarrow 2000). *Las Abejas* considers its nonviolent resistance not as isolated but as complementary to the resistance of the EZLN and in networks with global expressions of resistance.

In my analysis, *Las Abejas'* nonviolent resistance is the result of a dynamic interaction among various elements and actors. In particular, *Las Abejas'* construction of nonviolent identity and actions of resistance is affected by their collective memory of 500 years of resistance (history) and by the accompaniment of *campamentista* (human rights observers). The dynamic

interactions of internal and external elements and actors promote and challenge the organization's view of a "nonviolent field of contention" (McAdam and Tarrow 2000). By "nonviolent field of contention", I mean a socially constructed set of adversarial relationships that is embedded in a military, political, religious, or even cultural and social system that effectively constrains the well-being of all contenders. Well-being is another term for the ultimate goal of resistance that *Las Abejas* define as *Paz con Justicia y Dignidad* (Peace with Justice and Dignity). The promotion of *Las Abejas* women's position in the family and the community is an example of an extension of the organization's field of contention. Chiapas' history of resistance (time) and the presence of international human rights observers (space) are certainly two of the most important elements influencing *Las Abejas*' construction of nonviolent resistance.

Las Abejas' nonviolent contention is characterized by the organization's perception of resistance in relation to time and space. Numerous scholars have recognized that compression of time and space has characteristic dynamics of today's globalization (King 1995; Featherstone 1995; Featherstone and Lash 1995, Robertson 1992; 1995; Mittelman 2000). However, only a few have explained how time and space are also vital characteristics of today's indigenous resistance movements against neoliberalism (see Claver 1994a; Gosner 1996 and Bourdieu 1998). Certainly, since the time of Spanish colonization and the 'world society' it created, the indigenous people of the Highlands were never truly contained and isolated in time and space (Caligaris and Castillo 1998). The economic, political, religious and cultural transformations experienced by Mesoamerican indigenous populations during the last five hundred years finds a reflection and a continuation in what today is described as globalization trends (Beck 2000).

Nevertheless, today's intensity of communication along with the frequent presence of international observers particularly affects the indigenous communities regarding their

construction of resistance and identification process as resisters. Above all, the ever-increasing improvements in transportation and communication technologies, the universal demands for human rights, and the growing concern of the 'global civil society' (Frederick 1993; Smith, J. 1998; Slater 1992) are peculiar dynamics of the globalization era. *Las Abejas'* construction of resistance cannot be recognized in its full dimension and evolution unless we analyze how their construction of resistance is shaped by their relationship to numerous national and international human rights observers, particularly by the accompaniment of nonviolent organization Christian Peacemaker Teams' (CPT). In addition, this chapter recognizes how *Las Abejas'* identity of resistance is rooted into the Tzotzil collective memory of Mayan resistance. Therefore, before considering *Las Abejas'* ability to borrow 'external' elements or in creating their own adapted synthesis as nonviolent resisters, it is important to understand that the tree of *Las Abejas* resistance is rooted in the historical experiences of Mayan resistance and branched off into solidarity with international organizations.

Memory of Resistance: Continuing 500 Years of Resistance

On January 9, 1994, while many newspapers reported news about the newly initiated EZLN rebellion, *La Jornada*, a Mexico City daily newspaper, published a brief narrative about the 1712 Tzeltal Revolt (see Gosner 1992). Clearly, the message was an attempt to place the current rebellion within the long history of Mayan resistance in Chiapas. Additionally, many historians, anthropologists and social scientists have presented the 1994 Zapatista rebellion as another expression of the continuing resistance of the Mayan indigenous people (see Gossen 1994; Viqueira and Ruz 1996 and Womack 1999). However, as Kevin Gosner (1996) points out the need to be cautious about taking a long view in history and attempting to look at continuities over

time because “there is the temptation to romanticize the past” (p.28).⁶⁵ Mayan indigenous people are not passive objects of structural transformations. Nor are they exotic objects inflexible in their identity and unable to conform to societal structural transformations. Rather, as this research on *Las Abejas* indicates, indigenous organizations as part of the neozapatista movement identify their resistance in connection with history (CIACH 1999). In a changing world, indigenous people’s self-consciousness evolves identities and adapts actions in profoundly dynamic ways around the notion of resistance (see Watanabe 1992).

Keeping this in mind, studying the different indigenous experiences of resistance and rebellions over time provides another important aspect to consider. Although official Chiapas history recorded several episodes of indigenous rebellion, organized armed revolts have been rare. Similar to indigenous and peasants worldwide, “everyday forms of resistance,” using James Scott’s term, are a far more common response to oppression than organized rebellions.⁶⁶ Perhaps *Las Abejas*’ form of organized nonviolent actions of resistance falls into another category, between “passive resistance” and “revolutionary rebellion.” Richard Fox and Orin Starn’s (1997) *Between Resistance and Revolution* recognizes how the terrain of Latin American indigenous mobilization falls between mass revolutions and small-scale resistance. Therefore, *Las Abejas*’ experiences of nonviolent resistance are more appropriately labeled as ‘dissent’ or ‘direct actions’

⁶⁵ John Watanabe (1992) observes how this risk is particularly evident in Mayanists, who divided in their essentialist and historic perspectives are unable to see continuity over time in a new perspective. Essentialists view contemporary expressions of resistance as another expression of Mayan identity persistence commonly associated with cultural traits such as language, weavings and rituals. Historicists view contemporary expressions of resistance as reaction to the colonial, capitalist and globalization exploitations and oppressions but fail to recognize how indigenous people characterize themselves in connection with their own identity as people (see Tax, 1967; Freidel, Schele and Parker, 1993).

⁶⁶ Nevertheless, cross-cultural and historical studies on peasants and indigenous revolts have generated an important and appreciated body social science theory. Among many other works see the contributions of Theda Skocpol (1979), Timothy Wickham-Crowly (1992); Richard Fox and Orin Starn (1997) and Roger Lancaster (1988).

(Fox and Starn 1997, 2).

Las Abejas' historical consciousness as Mayan indigenous people in resistance is a fundamental but recent reality. As Tzotziles, they identify their resistance in continuity with the struggle of their Mayan ancestors. The connection with the past gives meaning to their present struggle and provides courage for their future actions of resistance. As a member of *Las Abejas'* *Mesa Directiva* recently commented: "We are indigenous people, but we are Mayans... we have a history" (Interview 66). Bishop Samuel Ruiz recognizes how this sense of people "with historical pre-Colombian roots has strengthened indigenous identities and resistance" (Interview 61). He also remembers how "they didn't have a history, because those who are dominated do not have a history, they only have the history of their oppressors" (ibid). Historical memory contributes to the formation of identity, but it also refers to the mixed or syncretic process of identity construction (see chapter 6). Subcomandante Marcos observed how he himself has learned to mix past and present by living for more than 30 years among the Mayan descendants of the Lacandon Jungle:

Stories of apparitions, of the dead of earlier struggles, of things that have happened, [are] all mixed together. It seems they are talking of the revolution (of the Mexican Revolution, the past one, not the one that is happening now) and at moments now, it seems that is mixed up with the colonial period and sometimes it seems that it is the re-hispanic period.⁶⁷

The historic memory of the indigenous people of Chiapas stretches over the past 500 years of known history of Spanish and Catholic Church conquests (Grant 1989; Tangeman 1995). Numerous *Las Abejas'* leaders place their current resistance in connection with the early episodes

⁶⁷ Radio UNAM interview with Subcomandante Marcos, March 18, 1994 quoted in the collection of interviews, letters and Communiqués of the EZLN during 1994: *La Palabra de Los Armados de Verdad* Vol II. Mexico City: Editorial Fuentoovejuna, 1994, 62.

of Mayan-Tzotzil resistance to European invaders of the Highlands in 1524. The following testimony of a *Las Abejas* catechist recalls their current experience of death and resistance in connection with the Battle of Sumidero (1524-34). The legend recounts how the Chiapanecan indigenous people resisted becoming slaves to Spanish conqueror, Diego de Mazariegos, by throwing themselves down the precipice of the Sumidero Canyon in a collective suicide (De Voz 1996).

Our ancestors had a courageous strength to resist Spanish exploitation and domination. They resisted the Spanish conquerors in Chiapas de Corzo and when defeated, they preferred to throw themselves off the cliff called *Cañon de Sumidero* [...]. Like the sacrifice of Acteal, we have to pay the price for our resistance... (Interview 21).

Bishop Samuel Ruiz's struggle for the defense of indigenous rights is associated by many with the heroic figure of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (1474-1566) who defended the rights and dignity of the Indios during the Spanish conquest. However, during the 1974 Indigenous Congress, Tzotziles and other indigenous people of Chiapas associated this historic example of resistance not with the bishop, but with the indigenous people themselves (Floyd 1997; Kovic 1997). At the time of the conquest, Las Casas, a Spanish-born Dominican priest, was already known in Spain for his resistance against the brutal treatment of 'Indios' in the colony of New Spain (Ricard 1986; Tangeman 1995). In 1544, Las Casas, was consecrated in the *Ciudad Real de Chiapa*, now San Cristóbal de Las Casas, as the first bishop of Chiapas. After six months of residence in Chiapas, Las Casas openly denounced the brutal treatment of the indigenous and challenged the assumption that "Indios" are inhuman because they lacked a soul or ability to reason (Krauze 1999; Ricard 1986). He also continued his battle in Spain, until he was forced to resign his post as Bishop of Chiapas (Yañez 1949). Las Casas was a notable exception to church complicity in the Spanish conquest.

Even though ambiguous in his position regarding the enslavement of Africans and rebellious Indios, his theological arguments and battle for the respect of indigenous rights actively inspired the collective memories of the resisting indigenous church of the SCLC Diocese (Tangeman 1995). A *Las Abejas* catechist comments:

There are many prophets like Bartolomé de Las Casas that denounce the oppression of the government. Tatik [Bishop Ruiz] is one of them and the organization *Las Abejas* is also in the same prophetic line. Yesterday, like today, our situation of oppression continues. But also our voice of opposition is stronger and if Bartolomé was only one before, now he is many. We are a prophetic voice when we oppose militarization, impunity, and the selling of our lands... (Interview 21).

Among numerous episodes of Chiapas' indigenous resistance, the religious character of the so-called Cancuc rebellion is particularly significant in the *Las Abejas*-Tzotzil collective memory. In 1712, following several local uprisings, the Tzotzil and Tzeltal indigenous people throughout the Highlands rebelled again, this time about the apparition of the Virgin Mary (Gosner 1992). They declared the indigenous town of Cancuc as their capital and rejected Ciudad Real (San Cristóbal de Las Casas) along with its civil and ecclesiastic authority (Burguete 1994). This phenomenon of having 'Two-Chiapas' (De Vos, 1996:9-10), symbolized in two opposing cities, one for the Indigenous and the other for the non-indigenous (Spaniards or *Ladinos*) is repeated along historical, ethnic, and political changes. Historically, during the Spanish conquest, the Chiapanecans had their own capital in Chiapa de Los Indios, now called Chiapa de Corzo, opposed to the capital for the Spaniards, Ciudad Real de Chiapa, which took the name of San Cristóbal de Las Casas in 1943 (Ibid.). Ethnically, San Cristóbal symbolizes the 'Indigenous' capital of the Highlands while the official capital Tuxtla Gutiérrez is the capital of the *Ladino*. Within the Highlands, however, Chamula is more the 'Indian' city opposed to the more modern and *Ladino* dimension of San Cristóbal. Politically, the experiences of Zapatista autonomous

bases indicate the formation of new indigenous *cabeseras* (capitals, or municipalities) opposed to the official towns, generally occupied by government supporters (Burguete, 1999).

Historians have recognized that numerous Tzotziles from San Pedro Chenalhó joined the 1712 rebellion (Gosner 1992; 1996; Wasserstrom 1983). Oppressed by heavy state and church taxes, the new movement of resistance originated around new enthusiasms inspired by the apparitions of the Virgin Mary to a thirteen-year old named Maria Lopez (Gosner 1996, 37). The rebellion emerged as a conscious action against the church's ongoing repression of Mayan rituals and beliefs in supernatural powers and belief in the constant presence of spiritual guardians (Ibid. 36). Without the possibility of expressing their beliefs through popular Catholic devotions, Tzotzil and Tzeltal communities had no alternative but to rebel. The indigenous rebellious group appropriated and adapted "Catholic rituals and practices, Spanish militia ranks, and the office structure of the royal government" (Gosner 1996, 38).

It is understandable how local and international organizations recognized in the 1994 Zapatista uprising as a reflection of this experience of rebellion against unjust and unbearable oppression (Ibid). In addition to the political and economic aspects of the rebellion, *Las Abejas* acknowledge the religious character of their resistance as a reflection of this historical episode. As an Abejas leader highlights:

The resistance we have today is sustained by the courage of our ancestors. Even when oppressed by Spaniards, they looked to their faith to find the courage not to be repressed in their dignity... They received a message from the Virgin but the Spanish and bishop of that time didn't believe them. They rebelled and gained autonomy and freedom... (Interview 27).

Las Abejas' collective memories echo numerous other episodes of rebellions and open acts of resistance throughout the history of Chiapas. Nonetheless, they prefer to identify their current experience of resistance, struggle and martyrdom as a continuation with their Mayan

ancestors' resistance throughout the last 500 years of oppression. The following reflection of *Las Abejas* on the occasion of the Columbus Day in 1999 confirms how yesterday's experiences of resistance to oppression is a continuum to today's struggle for peace in Chiapas:

Today October 12, 1999, we remember the pain and sufferings of our great grandparents, those that resisted living under the oppression, the exploitation and the marginalization of the big invaders of our people. Today it is 507 years since the exploitation began, the marginalization and the oppression for the big ones powerful, and we have resisted since then because we are a fundamental part of our Mayan race, natives of our country. For that reason today we manifest our pain, our sufferings and our sadness, because the federal and state government continue pawning in the exploitation, in the marginalization and in the oppression. They continue the famous strategy to exterminate the race, the culture, the ethnicity and the life of all the indigenous towns of all the states of the Mexican Republic. Today we express with grievance in our words that our homeland is still covered with the same violence that shed the blood of our Martyrs of Acteal. For that reason as yesterday, today and forever we continue manifesting and denouncing the situation in which one lives today in Chiapas and in the whole Mexican Republic. There is a wound deeper than our country for our dear peacemakers that lost their lives while praying and fasting for peace. But now the federal and state government has not yet taken the precautionary measures to make peace possible. On the contrary, it continues militarizing the indigenous communities in the whole state of Chiapas and in other states of the Mexican Republic, harassing and threatening the people. For that reason today, we demand the fulfillment of the demands that numerous Mexican towns are claiming all over the country. We demand the fulfillment of the agreements signed in San Andrés Larrainzar on Indigenous Rights and Culture. We demand the demilitarization of all the indigenous communities, so that peace with justice and dignity can be established all over Mexico, as we merit and deserve (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 12 October 1999).

Clearly, *Las Abejas'* connection with the past is not the fruit of a romanticized view of Mayan resistance. Remembering the Spanish invaders becomes the occasion to denounce the militarization of their lands and communities, a present-day form of invasion. *Las Abejas'* denouncement for both past and present expressions of violence grounds their appeal for the respect of the San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Culture. According to Gonzalo Ituarte, Justice and Peace Vicar of the Diocese, current episodes of indigenous domination are

historically interpreted by the people's consciousness and symbolic vision of reality. In his words:

The indigenous resistance against privatization is not just something related to the more or less recent dynamics of neoliberalism. In their consciousness, the ongoing privatization of Mayan ruins, and Mayan temples, as well as the military occupation of Mayan sacred places in the mountains echo the occupations and invasions of Spaniards 500 years ago... When *Las Abejas* refuse to have teachers from the government to educate their children they are in continuation with 500 years of cultural resistance against foreign domination (Interview 17).

The words and symbols used by the EZLN resonate with two important messages in the indigenous people's collective memory. First, they placed their rebellion in line with 500 years of indigenous resistance. As they proclaimed in their *First Declaration from the Selva Lacandona*:

¡Hoy Decimos Basta!... We are a product of 500 years of struggle: first against slavery, during the War of Independence against Spain led by insurgents, then to promulgate our constitution and expel the French Empire from our soil, and later [when] the dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz denied us the just application of the Reform Laws and the people rebelled and people like Villa and Zapata emerged, poor men just like us [...]."⁶⁸

Second, they echoed the Mexican Revolution's ideals of wealth and land redistribution. The 1994 rebellion took the name of Emiliano Zapata, reclaiming the long tradition of 20th century land struggle in Mexico that came out of the 1910 Revolution. After waiting 84 years for true land reform in Chiapas, the indigenous of the Highlands perceived the 1994 rebellion as a representation of Zapata's claims for land and justice for the indigenous people, for Mexico and for the world. A former *Las Abejas* member, now living in the autonomous Zapatista base in Polhó, explains how the connection with Emiliano Zapata goes beyond historical memory:

!Zapata Vive! Yes, Zapata still lives with us, because we continue the same claim for land, freedom and democracy he did during our revolution. He fought for

⁶⁸ From *Declaración de la Selva Lacandona* emitted by the *Comandancia General* (CCRI) de EZLN from the Selva Lacandona, Chiapas, Mexico on December 31, 1993.

land and dignity for all peasant people of Mexico, and most importantly for the indigenous people. Most of the people who fought next to him were indigenous people and Zapata himself offered his life for the indigenous cause... That is why we took his name. He is the most important person to us because he reflects not just history but today's reality. With the government's neoliberal agenda, our land, freedom and democracy are jeopardized... And the threat to our lives and identity are bigger than before. That is why our agenda has expanded and our form of Zapatismo has become much broader than the original version. We as indigenous people do not propose something only for us, but for all Mexico and for the rest of the world. They can kill us, as they did Emiliano Zapata, but we will continue to live because more and more people want democracy, dignity and justice (Interview 60).

According to Gossen (1996), to the indigenous communities of Chiapas, the emblematic figure of Subcomandante Marcos embodies the promising images of Emiliano Zapata and Topilzin Quetzalcóatl (p.116). In the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan sacred book, the often-mentioned legend of a plumed serpent called 'Topilzin Quetzalcóatl' represents a religious-political figure of a foreign god-king "who would one day return from the eastern sea to bring a new period of peace and prosperity to the entire region" (Ibid.). Like the Quetzalcóatl, a Mexican myth tells how Zapata had not died in 1919 but fled to the East to return one day to help his people (ibid.). Gossen's observation on the possible merging of myths supports Evon Vogt's (1994) suggestion about the possible sacred aspects of the Chiapas rebellion. Furthermore, many historical, religious, political and economic parallels between past and present expressions of oppression hold important messages for today's resistance to the global economy. The strategies used by *Las Abejas* in the construction of what I call a 'syncretic identity of resistance' are signs of hope for contemporary global struggles. As a human rights worker observes:

In the last five hundred years of colonialism and domination, various powers have tried to destroy indigenous populations. But these people are alive and continue to resist. Today's powers of globalization, similar to the dynamics of these five hundred years, are probably going to be neutralized by the strength of these people (Interview 09).

Thus, numerous Mexican and foreign people visiting *Las Abejas* come not only to express solidarity and support in their nonviolent resistance, but also to find hope, courage, and inspiration in their own struggles of resistance.

Accompanying Nonviolent Resistance: International Human Rights Observers

The Presence of Campamentistas

Since the beginning of the Zapatista National Liberation Army's rebellion in January 1994, thousands of human rights observers have come to Chiapas (Monroy 1994). Sent by Mexican and international NGOs and coordinated by the CDHFBC and Enlace Civil, they represented a concrete response to a dramatic increase of human rights violations registered among indigenous communities in the Highlands, Lacandon and Northern regions of Chiapas (La Jornada [Mexico City], 17 March 1994). Although it could be argued that Highlands indigenous communities never lived in isolation (Gossen 1986; Bricker and Gossen 1989), the frequent and steady presence of international observers of human rights has been affecting indigenous communities' perception of space. As a pastoral worker of the SCLC Diocese remarked:

The people of Acteal are tired from the constant coming and going of so many people from all over the world. Their 'hearts' are tired. However, they were able to create from nothing tremendous relationships. I saw how the previous *Mesa Directiva* started the tradition of keeping a record of all the people visiting Acteal on a world map. With lines of different colors, they linked the pin placed in Acteal to their visitors' cities and countries. That map, which is still hanging in the *Las Abejas* office in Acteal, is emblematic of the transformation they have been living as a people. They were able to situate themselves in the world and by locating where other people were coming from, they were opening themselves to the world... They even sent a letter to people in Kosovo and they even had people coming here from Australia (Interview 46).

Along with the experience of displacement, the coming of human rights observers and delegations from numerous countries plays an important role in the globalization and localization

dynamics in the construction of *Las Abejas* collective identity. The implementation of transnational grassroots networks (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000), in response to the worsening of socio-economic and human rights conditions caused by neoliberal impositions (Harvey 1998), have promoted a different perception of time and space in the indigenous communities. Numerous scholars have recognized the dynamics of time and space compression and expansion as important characteristics of a new social movement's construction of identity and action (see: Featherstone and Lash 1995; Slater 1992; Cox 1997 and King 1995). In the Highlands, the dynamic of compression of space is particularly represented by the international presence in the indigenous communities, which encourages *Las Abejas* to think, "Acteal... is at the center of the world" (Interview 26).

At the same time, cross-cultural dialogues with international observers advance *Las Abejas'* perception of themselves in the world and reassert themselves in their nonviolent resistance and indigenous identity (Nash 1995). Refugee camps become privileged spaces of encounter between local and global diversity. As international people come with diverse experiences, cultures and identities, so displaced families come into the refugee camp with their own histories and spatial identification with their community of provenience. In the refugee camps, *Las Abejas'* displaced people introduce themselves to foreign visitors specifying their social condition of displacement and origin. They may say, for example: "I am *desplazada* (displaced woman) from the community of Los Chorros." (Interview 23).

Other experiences affect *Las Abejas'* perception of space. The use of electronic communication, including the Internet, along with more frequent traveling at national and international levels certainly affects *Las Abejas'* perception of space. These means and experiences affect mostly the leadership and only a few representatives of the organization. The

presence of international observers, however, impacts the whole community. As a displaced woman observed:

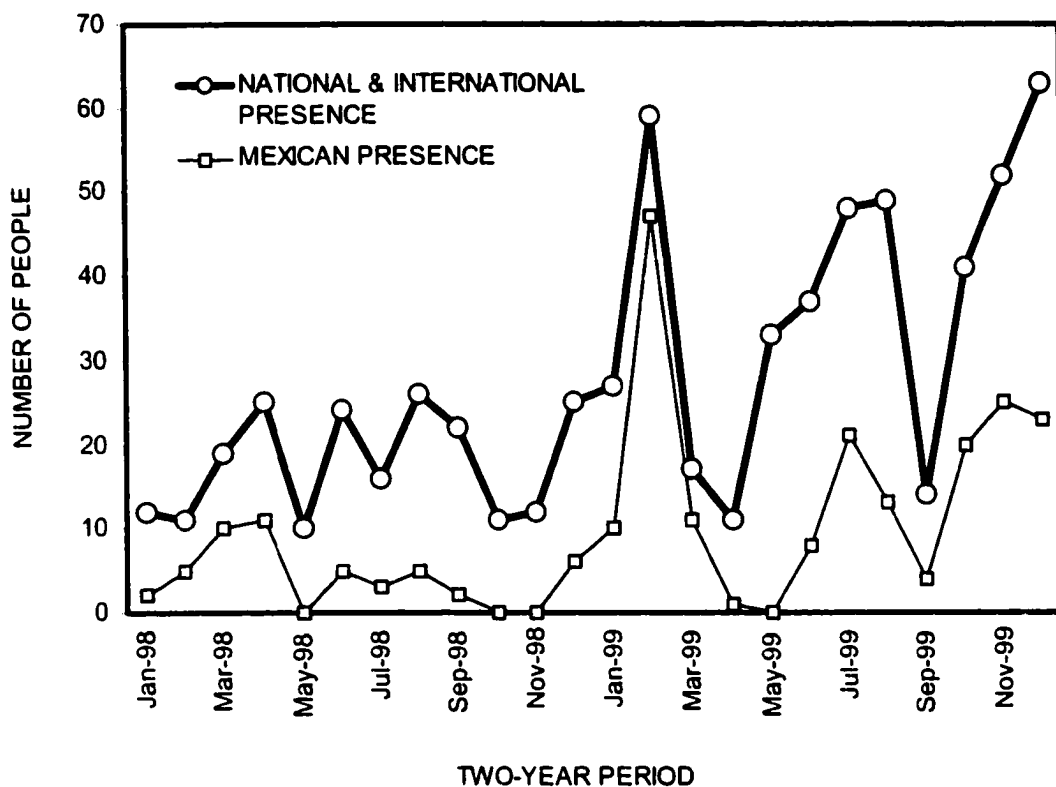
We are happy when the *campamentistas* (international observers) are among us. We feel safer with them and we are glad we can share our stories with them. Even though some of us do not speak Spanish... [or even] some of them do not speak Spanish, but we are able to know more about their stories too... and of their families and how they live where they come from. We are happy our children can learn from them too (Interview 23).

In their accompaniment of local workers and indigenous communities in resistance, international observers had to document the testimonies and possible incidents of human rights violations. But their principal task is to be present in the communities, staying visible in the area in order to prevent possible attacks of armed groups, paramilitaries, or the Mexican Army. The international presence of human rights observers and delegations significantly increased in the Chenalhó refugee camps after the Acteal massacre in December 1997.

Since then, numerous local and international NGOs working in the Highlands witnessed an intensification of military stations among indigenous communities in resistance. Identifying these moves as part of the government's low intensity warfare, *Las Abejas*, the EZLN and numerous NGOs requested international observers to protect communities in resistance. According to *Las Abejas'* testimonies, the constant presence of international observers in the refugee camps of Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen has "prevented the escalation of the conflict and comforted the 'sad hearts' of displaced families" (Interview 24).

Chart 8.1: Presence of International Observers

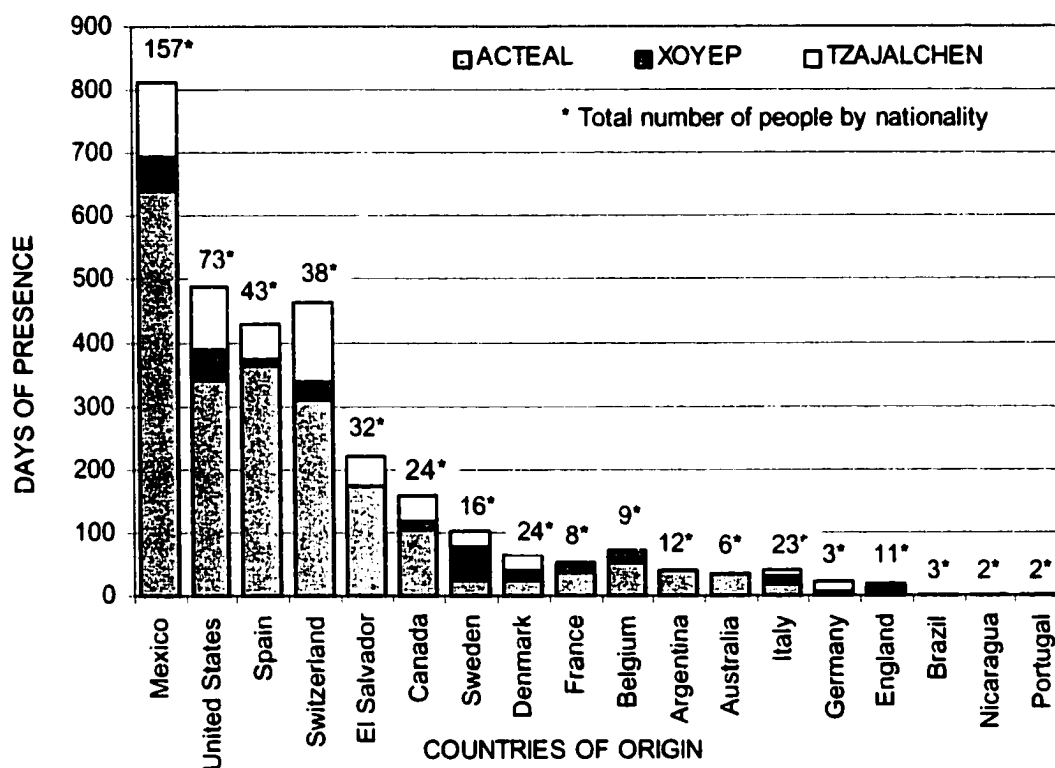
(Two-Years Period After the Acteal Massacre: January 1998 - December 1999)



(Source: Unpublished data of the CDHFBC, December 1999).

Chart 8.2: Nationalities of Human Rights Observers

(Two-Years Period After the Acteal Massacre: January 1998 - December 1999)



(Source: Unpublished data of the CDHFBC, December 1999).

Global Exchange and other NGOs have documented how Mexican and foreign human rights observers in remote communities in Chiapas have been an important factor in limiting the physical and emotional violence to indigenous organizations and communities who oppose the government (Global Exchange et al. 1999, 15). International observers also attempted to insure that the policy of genocidal warfare that occurred in neighboring Guatemala did not repeat itself in Mexico. After the Acteal massacre, *Las Abejas* began using electronic communication, including the Internet, to spread their communiqués, reporting on their condition, denouncing the

material and intellectual authors of the massacre, and inviting the international community to support them in their resistance. Similar to the EZLN in 1994, numerous NGOs including the CDHFBC, the CONAI, and the Diocesan Office of Communication, provided *Las Abejas* with the necessary materials for communication (see: Cisler 1998; Cleaver 1998; Froehling 1997; Knudson 1998).

Contrary to the Mexican government's claims, international observers do not teach or train in indigenous communities. Rather, their most important role is better described as being a 'presence' or 'accompaniment' to indigenous communities. Their role is to accompany local human rights workers and other organizations that face danger from local, national or international forces. According to Peace Brigades International's experience of accompaniment, human rights observers are like 'unarmed bodyguards' (Mahony and Eguren 1997). The premise of accompaniment is that "there will be an international response to whatever violence to volunteer witnesses" (Ibid. 1-2). International observers coordinated by the CDHFBC are expected to document eventual violations of human rights, especially through photos and audiotapes (Interview 02).

In the case of the *Las Abejas* refugee camps in Chenalhó, human rights observers are particularly helpful for the release of fear and anxiety. "When the *campamentistas* are present, [*Las Abejas*' people] feel more secure and they are not afraid of leaving women alone in the community" (Interview 02). In the communities of Acteal, Xoyep and Tzajalchen, *Las Abejas* recognize the presence of human rights observers as an indispensable vehicle of communication with the international community. As the representative of the *Mesa Directiva* comments:

The international observers and delegations are a very important presence for us. Militaries and paramilitaries try to isolate our communities, but thanks to their constant arrival here, we can keep informed about the world. Also because it's

very difficult for us to go out to say our stories, the people who visit us speak for us in their communities. They have supported us a lot when they speak of us in their countries. They themselves experience the harassment of militaries and paramilitaries. They can hear our sufferings, they can see our tears, and they can feel our fears of living displaced surrounded by militaries and paramilitaries. They can see beyond that mask of the government when they lie saying there is energy, roads and food. It's good they can see these are all lies... (Interview 66).

Las Abejas, local and international NGOs agree on the necessity of *campamentistas* (national and international observers) among indigenous communities in resistance. However, the foreign presence often has difficult moments. These include cultural insensitivity, the one-sidedness of political views and the lack of preparation in nonviolent techniques. Generally, the *campamentistas* coordinated by the CDHFBC belong to religiously based organizations. Most of them responded to Bishop Ruiz, then president of the CONAI 1995 appeal to the international civil society (EZLN 1995b, 81). Some differences can be recognized in the cultural and political approaches between the CDHFBC *campamentistas* stationed at *Las Abejas* refugee camps, and Enlace Civil *campamentistas* stationed exclusively in EZLN communities (Interview 14). *Las Abejas* generally refers to the presence of *campamentistas* as a fundamental support to their displaced communities and to their struggle of resistance (Interview 27). Nevertheless, they appreciate the closer accompaniment and nonviolent commitment of Christian Peacemaker Teams, who has particularly impacted *Las Abejas*' growth of nonviolent consciousness and active strategies of resistance.

The Accompaniment of Christian Peacemaker Teams

The Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT) was founded in 1986 as a unique initiative of active peacemaking among Mennonite and Brethren churches. They identify 'active peacemaking' with "the skills of negotiation, public witness and nonviolent direct action" (CPT

Brochure 1993). Based on the Anabaptist movement's historic experience of nonviolent resistance (Kniss 1997, 3), Mennonite and Brethren people have been particularly active in the objection to militarism, tax resistance, and refusal to purchase weapons. More recently, they have called for nuclear disarmament and for justice to impoverished populations. Although CPT borrows from decades of nonviolent activism from some of its members, it is still a new and developing organization (Kern 2000). Particularly, their application of "active peacemaking" is mediated and reinterpreted by their religious worldview, the participants' backgrounds and the local context of the struggle. Their ongoing experience of accompanying and directly supporting local nonviolent forms of struggle in Haiti, Hebron, South Dakota and Chiapas has shaped their "small-scale" active peacemaking. As founder and director Gene Stolfus explains:

We call ourselves "Christians" because we belong to the Christian communities where we go or that send us... We are nonviolent activists but we do not do "mass actions" but small-scale peace actions with the local community. An example of who we are and what we do are the Lent prayers we did with *Las Abejas* at the military checkpoints in Chenalhó. But our teams, currently present in Chenalhó (Chiapas), Hebron (Palestine) and South Dakota (USA), also do observations of human rights abuses and we document them. Even if the majority of us are Mennonite, there are representatives of other Christian churches. What unites us is our common spirituality for social justice. It's our faiths and nonviolent convictions that inspire us to do this ministry of presence in places that particularly need peace...(Interview 07).

In May 1998, CPT began its permanent presence in Chiapas following an invitation from the Pastoral Vicar of the SCLC Diocese.⁶⁹ Before then, several representatives of CPT had visited Chiapas with frequent international delegations of solidarity. After the December 22, 1997 Acteal Massacre, CPT learned about the existence of *Las Abejas*, or 'The Bees' as they call them, and of their nonviolent identity as an indigenous group in the Highlands of Chiapas. With the diocese's

invitation, CPT had the possibility to focus their attention on *Las Abejas*. They initiated an accompaniment that oriented *Las Abejas* to other global nonviolent struggles and historical experiences of nonviolent resistance. They began establishing closer networks of communication with the local team of the International Service for Peace (SIPAZ), the Diocese's Human Right Center Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas (CDHFBC), and other local and international NGOs based in San Cristóbal de Las Casas. They chose to begin their collaborative relation with *Las Abejas*, not through workshops or training, but through participating together in public prayers in front of the military bases. As a CPTer explains, their style of accompaniment in direct nonviolent actions soon gave positive results in mutual apprenticeship.

We are not here for them [*Las Abejas*]. Instead, we are as committed people who share [*Las Abejas*'] lifestyle of nonviolent resisters. For us CPTers to accompany *Las Abejas* means to discover and learn other ways to do nonviolent resistance (Interview 09).

Coming with their own history and religious identity as nonviolent resisters, CPTers found it particularly challenging to accompany a Mayan indigenous movement with a similar character and history of persecution. Planning and participating together in nonviolent and direct actions of resistance furthered CPTers' experience of accompaniment and collaboration. CPT's ultimate intention was to visibly engage in public nonviolent actions so that *Las Abejas*' nonviolent option could be recognized as a valid alternative to violence. However, with the increasing militarization, harassment of foreigners, and paramilitary presence, this constituted a very challenging context for collaboration. In March and April 1999, CPT and *Las Abejas* organized a series of prayer vigils at the military checkpoints in Chenalhó. The shared

⁶⁹ For a more detailed description of purposes and activities of CPT group in Chiapas see their web page at: <http://www.prairienet.org/cpt/mexico.html>

participation with these nonviolent initiatives favored trust and mutual understanding between the two organizations. This culminated on April 4, 1999, with the celebration of the ‘mystery of the resurrection’ when numerous Abejas of Xoyep and a few CPTers went to plant corn at the military base nearby (Interview 12). From this experience, CPTers have had a positive impression of the strength of *Las Abejas*’ identity.

Although conscious of the delicate cross-cultural relationship, CPT recognizes how the clear, strong character of *Las Abejas*’ identity is a guarantee for establishing a cross-cultural relationship that is not based on impositions but on dialogue (Ibid). Gene Stolzputs explains how the center for cross-cultural dialogue between CPTers and Abejas is the shared struggle and identity of nonviolent resistance:

We were accused by other NGOs of not being sensitive enough regarding the cultural diversity of *Las Abejas*. But we cannot be “cross-cultural police” even though we do want to be sensitive and respect cultural difference. We are not here to just “observe” or “camp.” We are here with the explicit intention to do nonviolent actions of resistance. Doing nonviolence doesn’t mean to be “pacifists” in the sense of being “good to everyone.” We do take sides and sometimes the line between one side and the other breaks and the tension increases. But this is not important for us... This is a starting point for dialogue and negotiation. *Las Abejas*, even in their cultural difference knows this dynamic of nonviolent actions. They also know that we, as foreign people, can do certain actions that would not be possible for them and vice versa... We have learned something staying close with *Las Abejas*. Be sensitive to cultural differences but do not leave your imagination at home. Because what is important here is to work together local and international organizations for an effective and peaceful resolution of the conflict... Like them, we are led by our spirituality that shapes also our connection as cultures and organizations. Ours is a nonviolent collaboration based on compassion and is not afraid of confrontation... Our style as CPTers is to define who we are in our nonviolent actions. This, we believe, is cross-cultural communication. And you have to show who you are... Before we arrive at a real and equal cross-cultural dialogue, CPT needs to accompany the organization at least for a year. So, if we go too fast, that is not dialogical nonviolent action but just compulsive actions (Interview 07).

The *campamentistas* coordinated by the CDHFBC have different characteristics and

objectives. First, *campamentistas* generally stay for a period of two weeks in the communities and then leave, while CPTers stay for periods of three months maintaining a continuous and personal relationship with *Las Abejas*. Many of them return to Chiapas. Second, the goal of *campamentistas* is to witness eventual human rights abuses or military invasions but rarely to intervene directly. CPTers, on the other hand, promote and sustain local direct nonviolent actions of resistance. Third, *campamentistas* rarely participate in social and spiritual events of the indigenous community. CPTers instead are recognized by their active participation. Fourth, CPTers systematically report news, appeals and actions on the Internet and they develop campaigns for Chiapas in the United States, Canada and other countries.

Finally, CPTers work in the community. This is quite different from other international observers who are sometimes not sufficiently prepared to live, discuss and act as community. According to a CDHFBC coordinator, “Most *campamentistas* find it very hard to live together for two weeks in a stressful situation” (Interview 02). Instead, CPT communitarian and religiously based identity is a valuable resource in stressful moments and constitutes important bridges of communication with *Las Abejas*. Furthermore, the specific nonviolent training CPTers have had and the contentiously open character of their presence differs from other NGOs stationed in Chiapas. However, it reflects, in certain aspects, *Las Abejas*’ way of doing resistance. CPT coordinator Kryss Chupp explains:

Actions speak louder than words... CPTers expose themselves to risk and in this we get somehow closer to the people’s sufferings and struggles. We are willing to go into places that other local and international NGOs define as “too dangerous.” We are not afraid of the military checkpoints because we are not afraid of being expelled. This is also part of the resistance. It takes a while to explain this to other organizations and even *Las Abejas*, used to the more careful behavior of other NGOs, who do not always understand that being deported, getting arrested, pushing away militaries, is part of who we are. This is why we can get so close to *Las Abejas*, because we are very similar in the way we do

resistance. But as international people, it is only by being visible that we can deter violence (Interview 06)

Although most CDHFBC coordinated campamentistas also come from faith based organizations, it is CPT's religious identity that particularly distinguishes their relationship with *Las Abejas*. Similar to *Las Abejas*, spirituality is at the foundation of CPT's nonviolent identity and actions of resistance. This common foundation gave CPTers numerous occasions to dialogue and develop their collaboration with *Las Abejas*. A nonviolent interpretation of Christianity facilitated understanding between the two organizations that collaborated in numerous nonviolent initiatives of resistance. Both organizations share an ecumenical approach. For example, CPTers often participate in Catholic liturgies and Catholic Abejas prefer calling themselves 'Christians' or 'brothers and sisters in faith' as a way of including Mennonite and Anabaptist traditions of CPTers (Interview 12). The inclusion of CPTers was also encouraged by the Jesuits' ecumenical and open spirit, who often asked CPT to actively participate in their prayers and liturgies. A full time CPTer explains how their connection with *Las Abejas* in the construction of nonviolent actions of resistance springs from their spirituality:

In terms of relationships, CPTers try not to be just companions. We are trying to be peers in the nonviolent struggle. We are not there just as a presence but we try to push with our own identity. We have tried to maintain continuity in our identity that is now identifiable by our actions: "You are the group that have accompanied *Las Abejas* in the military camp." The campamentistas of FRAIBA are more culturally diverse but have less participation in nonviolent actions. CPTers have created a special connection with *Las Abejas* because, like them, our nonviolent actions of resistance spring from our religious identity and our nonviolent spirituality. Also, participating with them in their prayers is a unique way to connect. But most of all, we are connected because they see us having our own kind of worship. Our spiritual identity is then reinforced by good personal relationships (like Pedro Xux) and by our style of sharing stories (like our experience in Hebron) instead of doing workshops on nonviolence (Interview 09).

By sharing moments of prayer, CPTers further the building of trust and collaboration between the two organizations. People of *Las Abejas* observe CPTers praying both with them and by themselves. They appreciate CPTers taking their faith seriously and by putting their lives at risk. As nonviolent indigenous people who organize their actions of resistance around their faith and spiritual dignity, *Las Abejas* easily identify with a foreign organization like CPT who also resist nonviolently and base their actions on their faith. This common ground of nonviolent spirituality and resistance opens the doors for deeper relationships and dialogues. Spirituality becomes the foundation for inter-organizational relationships. As a CPTer commented: “We get closer as we develop calluses on our knees together” (Interview 07). But it is public prayers and common participation to active actions of resistance that creates a bond between CPT and *Las Abejas*:

During the vigils at the military checkpoints, we really created a bond. They asked us to share our stories of resistance. We learned so much about each other by simply sharing stories... I remember we started a very deep conversation on dreams with two catechists of *Las Abejas* while we were fasting at the military camp in Xoyep. We shared our dreams and I learned so much about their spirituality during our dialogue... (Interview 07).

The accompaniment of nonviolent groups such as CPT gave *Las Abejas* courage to continue in their difficult position of being in the middle of the conflict. After the Acteal massacre, it was a difficult time for *Las Abejas*. “They could have chosen to embrace a rifle and revenge [their] deaths or at least to defend [themselves] from other possible attacks of the paramilitaries... but they didn’t” (Interview 19). They remained firm in their pacifist identity and nonviolent choice thanks to their own spiritual convictions as well as because of the solidarity expressed by other nonviolent groups from other parts of the world.

In summary, *Las Abejas*' nonviolent identity and strategy of resistance have matured

thanks first to the accompaniment of the diocese and later to CPT and other national and international religious based NGOs. These contacts helped *Las Abejas* focus their resistance. Particularly, they have supported *Las Abejas* women in the struggle of resistance as an organization and within their communities. In the following sections, I first explore a few basic characteristics of *Las Abejas*' development of nonviolent consciousness and strategies. Then, I consider nonviolent resistance from the experience and perspective of *Las Abejas* women.

Developing Nonviolent Consciousness and Strategies

The pastoral work of the diocese among Tzotzil communities of Chenalhó and later the accompaniment of religiously based international NGOs was crucial for *Las Abejas*' development of their nonviolent identity and strategies. Before *Las Abejas*' constitution in 1992, a few pastoral workers of the SCLC Diocese accompanied Tzotzil communities of Chenalhó and encouraged them in their identification process as a pacifist people. Supported by Bishop Ruiz and his pastoral vicars, Father Miguel Chanteau and a few sisters promoted the biblical foundations of nonviolence for several years and taught courses on the pacifist options of Christ and his followers (Interview 21). When conflicting parties began to emerge in Chenalhó, the pastoral team of Chenalhó resolutely continued to teach nonviolence among *Las Abejas* communities until the Acteal massacre (Ibid). A few pastoral workers were deeply shocked by this tragedy and eventually felt responsible for promoting nonviolence (Ibid.). Alonzo Vázquez Gomez and other catechists in the municipality also strongly encouraged their communities to base their peaceful resistance in the courage of first Christian martyrs and on their Mayan ancestors' refusal to accept Spanish domination (Ibid.). Padre Pedro Arriaga, a Jesuit priest working in Chenalhó, recognizes *Las Abejas*' nonviolent identity being an effect of this formation, but also of clear choices and discernments in the midst of escalating conflicts and misunderstandings:

The work of the diocese contributed a lot to the formation of *Las Abejas'* identity as a nonviolent movement. The pacifist characters rooted in their Mayan-Tzotzil culture and spirituality were confirmed by the biblical messages of the nonviolent Christian mystic. They were able to combine these elements and form their own convictions as a pacifist group. This was, however, not an automatic result but a fruit of their choice too. Many Tzotzil Catholics and catechists found themselves uncomfortable with the pacifist, neutral and ambiguous position of *Las Abejas* and preferred to join the EZLN in Polhó. There are about 50 to 70 catechists in the autonomous base of Polhó who were previously with *Las Abejas* [...]. The pacifist position of *Las Abejas*, chosen and redefined after the many pressures of the PRI and of the EZLN probably resulted with them being an easy target for the paramilitaries in Acteal. They weren't armed or in a fortified refugee camp as the Zapatistas of Polhó...(Interview 19).

The pastoral contents and character of the religious formation received for many years by Catholic Tzotziles explains how *Las Abejas'* nonviolent identity is characterized both as “Christian and Mayan resistance” (Interview 48). Rooted in their own religious synthesis of Tzotzil-Mayan and Catholic-Christian spiritualities, *Las Abejas* clearly reveals since its foundation a religious and political character in their nonviolent actions of resistance. Pilgrimages, public prayers and fasting are the most common nonviolent means for *Las Abejas* to publicly manifest their concerns and dissatisfaction with the authorities. With these initiatives, they have been able to effectively mobilize people in the municipality of Chenalhó and they have captured the attention and solidarity of people, organizations and institutions at state, national and international levels. According to Kovic (1997) pilgrimages are one of the most effective ways to ask for peace and justice and impel authorities to respect human rights:

Pilgrimages demonstrate how the poor walk with one heart. At a literary level, the pilgrims walk for hours from their communities to their sites where the event is to begin; then they walk as a united group to their destination, usually a church. At another level, the pilgrims walk with one heart in the struggle to defend their human rights. In their journey, they pray together asking for peace at the same time that they demonstrate to the government their number and strength (Kovic 1997, 171)

At the time of my writing, on October 12, 2000, about 253 pilgrims from *Las Abejas* and another nonviolent indigenous organization Xi'Nich, or Las Hormigas (The Ants), began marching from Acteal to the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Along their very long and arduous itinerary (365 kilometers), they prayed for the dissolution of the paramilitary groups in Chiapas who prevent the return of displaced families from Chenalhó and Tila to their original communities. They also asked the government to free political prisoners and comply with the signed San Andres Peace Accords for Indigenous Rights and Culture. In a public communiqué, they also asked that, during the transition period for Mexico, people would not choose the way of violent insurrection and that the government authorities avoid the temptation of violent repression. During this pacifist pilgrimage these two nonviolent organizations offered the Mexican people the possibility of following ethical and peaceful methods of social transformation: non-violence, non-collaboration, conscientious objection, active resistance and civil disobedience (*Las Abejas* Communiqué, 12 October 2000).

Pilgrimages are common religious manifestations among the indigenous people of Chiapas and throughout Latin America. They are carried out to commemorate important dates in Catholicism or Mayan-agricultural critical stages in the cycle of maize (Crumrine and Morinis 1991; Adams 1991). Nevertheless, *Las Abejas'* pilgrimages are characterized by the mixing of religious motives with political meanings. Like other organizations of Pueblo Creyente, *Las Abejas* recognizes the force that organized pilgrimages, public prayers, and collective fasting have on socio-political change (Kovic 1997, 174). In the logic of *Las Abejas'* religious worldview that is influenced by the progressive diocese and Tzotzil-Mayan popular religiosity, there is a dependent relationship between the spiritual body and social body of the community. Consequently, religious actions are prompted by socio-political needs for peace, justice and

dignity (see Norget 1997). Any religious manifestation is framed as a public denunciation of the oppression of local political authorities, usually extended at regional, national and international levels through communiqués to the press. However, *Las Abejas* perceive the use of pilgrimages, public prayers and fasting as expressions of their nonviolent identity and of their search for peaceful means to solve conflicts. Such manifestations become “a way to ask God for peace, appealing to the international community and compelling our government to respect political diversity promoting democracy and justice (Interview 26). As a CPTer observes:

These people (*Las Abejas*) really want peace and they use true nonviolent ways to reach peace. For example, the other day when people received new threats and were afraid of a possible second ‘Acteal’ they did not call the armed EZLN of Polhó or the Mexican Army. Instead, they went to pray and fast in the chapel. There they organized a march to Chenalhó and San Cristóbal to denounce this situation. They chose nonviolent methods and resisted the temptation of responding to violence with violence (Interview 10).

Las Abejas began opting for nonviolent methods of resistance since its constitution in November 1992. Nevertheless, the organization grew in its nonviolent strategies and consciousness in relation with nonviolent and religious based international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs). Although numerous INGOs began their presence in Chiapas after the 1994 Zapatista uprising, it was only after the 1997 Acteal massacre that many organizations entered into contact with *Las Abejas*. International Service for Peace (SIPAZ), the Christian Peacemaker Teams (CPT), the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Bruderhof Foundation, and numerous other ecumenical and Anabaptist organizations offered *Las Abejas* the possibility to associate their identity and experience of pacifism with other nonviolent traditions and examples. Through these international contacts, subsequent initiatives of solidarity and accompaniment, *Las Abejas* tries to overcome still existing local misinterpretations of their nonviolent identity. As a Presbyterian Priest in Chenalhó remarked:

Las Abejas are not a pacifist group [...]. They are violent people! They have arms! *Las Abejas*, like all the rest of the Catholics and of the Zapatistas, are like the leader of their churches: they go to the poor and say "let's go to get things from the rich people." *Las Abejas* people say we have a bad government [...] but God has authorized this government [...]. They choose these passages of the Bible where God supports war [...]. We are not saying this because we are with the government. We are not, we are poor people and there are no problems here. *Las Abejas* families who were living here can come back in their houses (Interview 64).

Although Priistas and Zapatistas of Chenalhó continue misunderstanding and criticizing *Las Abejas'* choice of nonviolent resistance, *Las Abejas* have now earned a clearer understanding of their nonviolent option. The 1998 conference and exhibit "Gandhi en Chiapas" offered a significant contribution to *Las Abejas'* growth of nonviolent identity. On the occasion of the 50th anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi's death, the International Service for Peace (SIPAZ) promoted numerous initiatives concerning nonviolence in San Cristóbal de Las Casas from October 17 to October 31, 1998. They wanted to promote a nonviolent resolution of the Chiapas conflict. Among numerous national and international followers of Gandhi's philosophy, *Las Abejas* received a central space for sharing their experience of nonviolence and reflecting with others on active forms of nonviolent resistance. The conference also included meditations and other important initiatives that affirmed *Las Abejas'* nonviolent spirituality. A CPTer who participated in this conference recalls how *Las Abejas'* stories of religious-based nonviolent resistance found counterparts in the example of Gandhi and other nonviolent resisters:

During the Gandhi conference the most impressive part was members of *Las Abejas* telling their story of growing as a nonviolent movement. During the conference many of them heard for the first time the stories of Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day and the Dalai Lama. They were so enthusiastic and wanted to learn more about these and other stories of nonviolent resistance. Because *Las Abejas* are a Christian based movement, I don't know how they related to Gandhi. But they understood very well that he was a religious man. Unfortunately, the presenters at the conference were very intellectual and the organizers missed inviting *Las Hormigas*, another nonviolent indigenous group

in resistance, quite similar to *Las Abejas*. They too identify with the EZLN demands except for the use of weapons [...]. I found the sharing of nonviolent stories was the most empowering experience that happened during the Gandhi conference (Interview 11).

Although still traumatized by the recent Acteal massacre, disheartened by the persisting threats of paramilitaries and exhausted by the increasing military presence in their communities, *Las Abejas* found hope for peace in Chiapas with Gandhi's example. They identified with his use of marching, fasting and prayers to urge the British to leave India free. They also found inspiration to strategize new forms of nonviolent resistance. Another participant of the conference recalled:

The Gandhi conference organized by SIPAZ gave *Las Abejas* the opportunity to know the story of Gandhi and how the British Empire finally moved out of India. They did many comparisons with their own story of resistance. For instance, I remember how they identified their resisting action of not paying the government for electricity as similar to the issue of salt for Gandhi [...]. They know how much the government is exploiting their natural resources and using the electricity produced in Chiapas while people do not receive basic services. That is why they attach their electric wires to the poles and they do "electric resistance" (Interview 13).

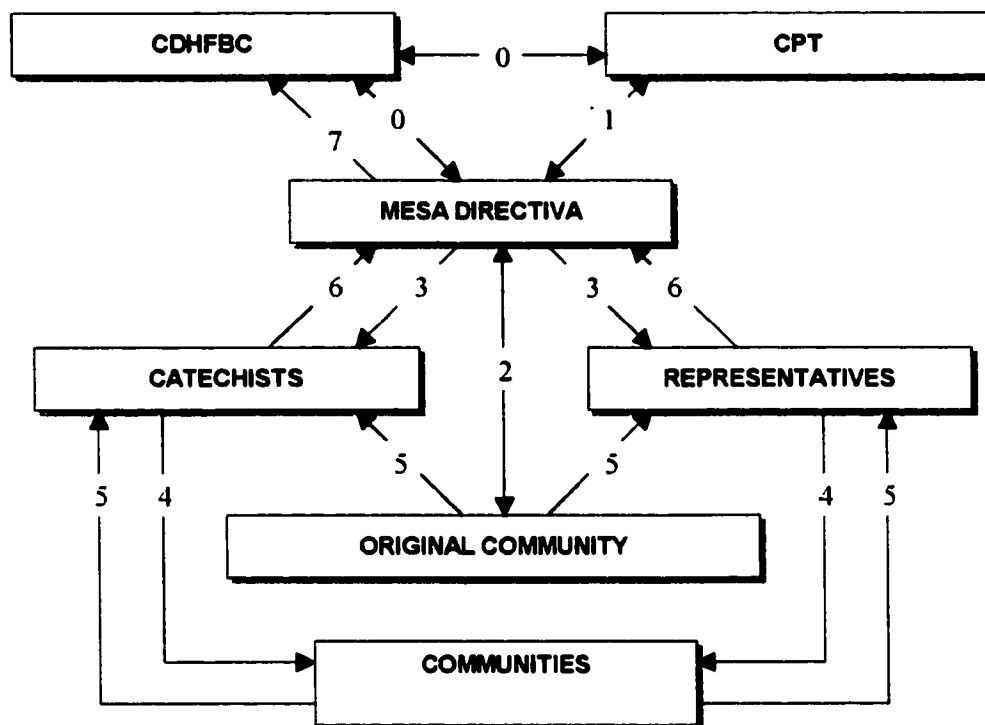
Through this initiative and the accompaniment of Christian Peacemaker Teams, *Las Abejas* framed nonviolence in its international, historical and religious expressions. Since 1998, *Las Abejas* has sent communiqués and representatives to the annual nonviolent protest against the School of the Americas at Fort Benning, Georgia.

However, "international nonviolent organizations have also learned from *Las Abejas*' nonviolent identity of resistance" (Interview 35). The following interview with a founder of *Las Abejas* shows how *Las Abejas* is now able to frame its nonviolent resistance with other nonviolent struggles in the world. It also reveals their consciousness and responsibility of sharing their consciousness and experiences of nonviolence with international visitors.

The Zapatista resistance here in Chiapas is, in its complexity, similar to the movements that have been producing changes around the world. What is happening here in Chiapas is also part of the Intifada movement in Palestine, the nonviolent movement in the Philippines, the people who have destroyed the Berlin wall or the recent nonviolent resistance against the US Army in Puerto Rico [...]. *Las Abejas* and the Zapatista struggle is nonviolent in the same way of the resistance movement in South Africa [...]. *Las Abejas* nonviolent resistance in Chiapas is like the one of Mahatma Gandhi in India. In our sufferings and struggles we are showing who we are to the world. Foreign people who come to accompany us come here to learn that it is possible to seek changes with nonviolent means (Interview 25).

Las Abejas' collective nonviolent actions are constructed through dialogical networks of communication with other organizations. An example of this took place in February 1999 when CPT suggested praying at the military bases during Lent. The *Mesa Directiva* decided to integrate a prayer during a meeting with the municipal president. They also suggested sending communiqués about this event to the press and to international organizations of solidarity around the world. While sociologists and anthropologists may be concerned about the origin of ideas influencing an indigenous movement's construction of nonviolent resistance, *Las Abejas* focus their attention on the process of dialogical networks of communication and how they elaborate nonviolent actions of resistance from it. Figure 8.1 exemplifies the intense networks of communication occurring between *Las Abejas*, the CDHFBC and CPT for the pacification of a nonviolent action of resistance proposed by CPT to the *Mesa Directiva* in Acteal.

Figure 8.1: Constructing Dialogical Networks of Communication



(Source: Various Interviews and Observations, December 1999)

STAGE 0: Informal communications between CPT, CDHFBC and the *Mesa Directiva* of Las Abejas.

STAGE 1: CPT presents the initial idea, which is changed and/or extended in dialogue with the *Mesa Directiva*.

STAGE 2: The *Mesa Directiva*, in collaboration with the catechists, proposes to the original community (usually Acteal) who prays about it and gives some initial feedback.

STAGE 3: Meetings with catechists and/or community representative to present and discuss the project

STAGE 4: The catechists and/or community representatives go into their communities

STAGE 5: The community, with the catechists and community representatives, pray and organize details of the project.

STAGE 6: The catechists and/or community representatives return to the *Mesa Directiva* to explain how the planning and actualization will be made in their own community.

STAGE 7: The *Mesa Directiva* communicates with CDHFBC and other local NGOs. It also organizes the official communication to the press.

Las Abejas' style of conducting dialogical networks of communication has influenced CPTers' strategies of constructing nonviolent actions of resistance in Chiapas and other contexts.

We go too, like *Las Abejas*, to consult Fraiba, Sipaz and the *Mesa Directiva* before starting a new action of resistance. Actually we have learned from *Las Abejas*, that these dialogues are important to work together as collective teams for peace and avoid useless 'protagonisms'... CPTers in Chiapas use the example of the Bees in constructing active nonviolent resistance through dialogue and prayer. This method is actually more in line with our identity and it is now inspiring our presence even in South Dakota and Hebron (Interview 13).

Although dialogical networks of communication between different organizations can be time consuming, mobilization at community level is generally a quick process. For example, during Lent 1999, CPTers proposed to *Las Abejas* of Xoyep to go to the nearby military base to pray. CPTers were impressed that it took only ten minutes for *Las Abejas* to make a community decision and in a few more minutes, about 100 Abejas were mobilized and ready to go down to the base (Interview 09). Their coordination and conviction as a group facilitates their promptness in action. These qualities smooth the progress of nonviolent mobilization and characterize *Las Abejas'* style of resistance. Their 'humble' approach masks a courageous and firmly nonviolent option of resistance. Through simple gestures, they transform conventional hierarchies of power and prestige. As a CPTer recalls:

On the 23rd of May about 70 Abejas of Xoyep went down to the military base. The militaries tried to stop them. In that moment the men of *Las Abejas* spoke to them and explained what they were going to do. In the meantime, all the women passed through the checkpoint. In my experience as a nonviolent activist I have never seen so much decision and stubbornness in doing active resistance.... Then all *Las Abejas* occupied the road in prayer. A high-ranking official of the Mexican Army escorted by other militaries in a jeep tried to pass, but they did not let him go through. The women did not move an inch to give him the road. So, he had to wait to go to his base. A few minutes later an old Tzotzil man was going back home from working his field. He was with his donkey. It was amazing to see how all the people, without saying a word let him go through, but not the general. It was a simple scene but also meaningful of their strength and

unity as an organization (Interview 13).

Las Abejas' construction of nonviolent actions of resistance follows dynamics of inclusion, combination, and elaboration. They have demonstrated that they can positively welcome suggestions from international NGOs, combining them with their own characteristics and elaborating a unique and 'syncretic' style of nonviolent resistance. This style was applied to the initiatives during Lent 2000. CPT proposed to the *Mesa Directiva* their general idea to organize a nonviolent action of resistance around the Biblical Jubilee theme of the return of the displaced people into their own land. Following a dialogical network of communication between *Las Abejas* community, the *Mesa Directiva*, CPT and other NGOs, the initial idea developed into making a Lenten vigil where every four hours people could do public prayers while fasting in front of the military camp of Xoyep. CPT's original idea for Easter Sunday was to dismantle the military tents but *Las Abejas* transformed this idea into occupying the military's helicopter pad. They changed the positions of the stones around the pad and formed the word "paz" (peace). "They also formed a sun, a moon and the stars to express their cosmological vision of peace" (Interview 07). This and numerous other examples of *Las Abejas'* construction of nonviolent action shows how different elements are not integrated passively but transformed and adapted into a new reality.

Gender of Resistance: Women's Double Front of Resistance

Women are always the front line of *Las Abejas'* actions of nonviolent resistance. Their presence and courageous resistance in the neozapatista movement has been recognized both at the local and global levels (Millán 1996; Rojas 1995; Rovira 1996). All the same, their importance and respected position is not because the EZLN or *Las Abejas* are feminist movements but

because these women “have won the right to be there” (Ibid, 64). While supporting the mobilization of organizations and communities around the struggle for land, justice, democracy and dignity, they have also begun to put forward gender demands: participation in the leadership, respectful relations within the family, and democratic participation in the decision making process of their communities and organizations (Eber 1998). For the last ten years, Indigenous women established numerous collaborations with national and international NGOs, universities, churches and began creating their own organizations (Glusker 1998). Within organizations such as J'pas Joloveltik, the Organization of Artisan Women in the Highlands, the *Coordinadora Diocesana de Mujeres* (CODEMU), the Christian Base Communities (CEBs) of the Diocese and numerous cooperatives of weavers and bakers often supported by the Coordinating Committee for Peace (CONPAZ), women have worked on questions of reproductive health, human and indigenous rights, against sexual violence and for the promotion of women's dignity (Millán 1996, 66). As organized groups, women were able to demand the respect of their gender rights along with economic, political, and ethnic rights. Their voices were finally heard within their communities and together they achieved important solutions for the prevention and denunciation of domestic violence (Interview 33).

There are two fronts of *Las Abejas* women's nonviolent resistance. One is external and in opposition to military presence, paramilitary violence, government corruption and the economic impositions of the market (Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; Nash 1993). Emotions are an important component in the construction of this front of resistance. The other front is less visible because it is internal to their culture, community and family relationships. In this front, women resist discriminatory attitudes, exclusion from leadership and domestic violence. Less visible is also the women's ongoing resistance in their daily family struggles. There are women in Acteal that are

taking care of the eight orphans from the massacre (Hernandez Castillo 1998, 33). Although characterized by poor economic conditions and difficulties for living in displaced camps, these women manage to provide food, education and love to other children. Numerous *Las Abejas* women opened their families to orphans and shared tortillas with displaced people. Without women's practice of welcoming and sharing, resistance in the communities would have been easily discouraged.

Women survivors, especially elderly women who have lost several members of their family, face the challenge to react to their status of desperation, sadness and fear (Interviews, 31). They seem caught up in their endless stories of death (Interview 02). In Acteal for example, where numerous international visitors want to meet survivors of the massacre, mostly women are those who recall these tragic moments. They certainly have an important part in the *Las Abejas* collective effort of resistance. Nevertheless, now most women survivors refuse to speak about the massacre and try to carry on with their lives and their daily resistance (see: Hernandez Castillo 1998). Women's most courageous expression of nonviolent resistance is in overcoming victimization and in continuing to organize even in the midst of numerous difficulties. As a Mexican woman working among *Las Abejas* women comments:

Today, *Las Abejas* women resist fears... provoked by paramilitary activities, the shocking experiences of the Acteal massacre and their displacement. They resist, together with men and catechists against the lack of information and the propaganda of the PRI government supported by the Mexican Army.... [But most of all], women resist in their daily lives by facing the challenges of surviving the difficult life of refugee camps. They participate in courses in education and health, become catechists and learn more Spanish (Interview 32).

At the external front of resistance, *Las Abejas* women take part of their organization's identity of resistance. They are conscious of their role as a 'human wall' between the aggressor and their community (Interview 13). Similar to Zapatista women, *Las Abejas* women identify

themselves as 'protectors of the community' (Interview 23) and recognize the sacrifice of their sisters in the Acteal massacre as 'an extreme action of nonviolent resistance' (Interview 23). Based on the fact that most of the victims were women, some have hypothesized how also in this occasion women placed themselves as human shields to protect the community. Because women knew that men would have been surely killed by paramilitaries, some believe that 'women asked their men to go away while they chose again to place themselves between the aggressors and the community' (Interview 13). According to the coordinator of a women's rights project in the Highlands, *Las Abejas* women do not yet have a clear vision of their powers as women (Interview 35). However, they are encouraged by the example of Zapatista women and by the egalitarian and empowering suggestions written in the Zapatista's *Ley Revolucionaria de Las Mujeres* (Revolutionary Women's Law)' (Interview 35).⁷⁰

Las Abejas women recognize that nonviolent, direct actions carry empowering and healing emotions of resistance. Their lining up at the entrance of their community, blocking the entrance to militaries or Priistas is an empowering experience. Being there means taking action, being community, and reinforcing their emotions to continue their organization's nonviolent experience of resistance. *Las Abejas* women exemplify the organization's emotional character of resistance. Contrary to certain authors' conclusions, I agree with James Jasper (1998, 398) that just because actions of resistance are emotional, does not necessarily mean that they are irrational. Actually, emotions are a fundamental aspect of social actions and, in the case of *Las Abejas*, they

⁷⁰ With the Revolutionary Women's Law, the EZLN incorporates women into the revolutionary struggle regardless of their race, creed, color, or political affiliation, requiring only that they share the demands of the exploited people and they commit themselves to the laws and regulations of the movement. In addition, the Revolutionary Women's Law guarantees the demands for justice, equality, respect and full participation in the leadership of the movement (Hernández, 1994; Zatzemberger, 1995: 109-110; Womack, 1999: Ch.21).

represent important healing energies for its members. Numerous authors have recognized emotions as the 'glue' of solidarity and what ultimately mobilizes people to find the necessary courage for dangerous actions of resistance.⁷¹

James Jasper's long list of emotions relevant to protest (1998, 406-407) does not really exemplify what *Las Abejas* women experience during their actions of resistance. Their collective nonviolent actions are not merely an emotional 'reaction' (p.206) from survivors' experience of grief, loss, and sorrow. Rather, their collective actions find explanation into *Las Abejas*' deep emotions tied with their beliefs and moral values. As Carolyn Vogler (2000) argues, *Las Abejas* collective nonviolent identity and actions are the outcome of an interplay between sociological and unconscious psychological processes. In other words, the emotional significance of *Las Abejas*' nonviolent identity and action can be explained only by looking at both cognitive sociological-political and unconscious psychological-religious factors.

Generally, survivors are characterized by a so-called post-traumatic stress disorder associated with a status of apathy, resignations, and immobilizing fears. Yet, *Las Abejas* have been able to engage in courageous public actions of resistance not just based on their indignation against corrupted authorities or because they have anything else to lose but their lives. As for other *Pueblo Creyente* indigenous organizations, *Las Abejas* clearly manifest how their collective identity and action emerges from a combination of cognitive and unconscious characteristics that

⁷¹ To further the analysis collective emotions' role in social movement theory see: Randall, Collins. "Stratification, Emotional Energy and the Transient Emotions." In *Research Agenda for the Sociology of Emotions*, edited by Theodore D. Kemper. Albany: SUNY Press, 1990. More recent development on this subject are to be found in research of James Jasper (1997; 1999) and Alberto Melucci (1989; 1996). Their research, however, is less empirical and more oriented by social psychology or by individualist perspective that little apply to collective cultures such as the one here considered. Constructionist positions on this subject are generally more sensitive to the cross-cultural diversity of

must be considered both in their deliberate intentions and reactive activities. Therefore, an attentive observation of *Las Abejas*' public actions of resistance suggests considering their emotions beyond Yasper's simple distinction of affective and reactive emotions in social movements (Yasper 1998, 406).

Las Abejas emotions of resistance cannot be explained unless placed in relation to the movement's religious identity and their faith in life and resurrection. Confirmed by their Mayan-Christian belief in the presence of ancestors, in the community, and in the journey of Jesus from death to life (see Chapter 6), *Las Abejas* women find strength to resist military invasion and paramilitary threats. Social movement theories identify moral shock (Jasper 1997), blame and injustice (Gamson 1992), or cognitive liberation (McAdam 1982)⁷² as the crucial elements to understand the movement's emotions for the construction of collective actions. Indeed, reactive emotions such as shock for the unjust death of their loved ones, anger for the government's responsibility or indignation over the impunity of paramilitaries are recognizable among *Las Abejas* women's external front of resistance. However, I argue that the syncretic identity of *Las Abejas*, formed by the combination of cultural, religious, political and nonviolent elements, not only forms cognitive boundaries but also collective emotions inspiring nonviolent actions of resistance. Actually, their emotional facets of resistance draw from and give strength to their collective identity. *Las Abejas*' specific emotional associations, easily observable among *Las*

emotions. For an overview of those see: Peggy A. Thoits, The Sociology of Emotions." *Annual Review of Sociology* 15 (1989): 317-342.

Abejas women's collective actions of resistance, seem to cut across Jasper's distinction between affective and reactive emotions (p. 407). Their emotions of resistance are not "women's work," but they are shared by all members of *Las Abejas*. However, *Las Abejas* women's ability to transform feelings of depression, fear and guilt resemble the ability of many women's groups to make of their emotional experiences of marginality in society a useful tool for social change (Jasper 1997; 1998).

At the internal front of resistance, *Las Abejas* women confirm Foucault's principle that power exists on the micro-level and must be resisted and confronted at all levels (1980). Foucault believed that power did not rest in the sole domain of institutions but was diffused throughout society, affecting people in a multitude of situations (ibid.). Tzotzil women live in a culturally and socially oppressive environment. As Comandante Ramona, a Tzotzil woman member of the leadership of the EZLN (CCRI) explains:

Because women are living in difficult situations, women are the most exploited of all, the most oppressed. Why? Because for 500 years, they have not had the right to speak, to participate in assemblies, they have no right to education, or to speak in public, or to take cargos in their communities. No. The women are completely oppressed and exploited. We get up at 3:00AM to cook corn, and we don't get to rest until the evening after everyone else is asleep. And if there isn't enough food, then we give out tortillas to the children, to our husbands. We women demand respect, true respect as Indians. We also have rights...⁷³

Observing how Tzotzil women's role is generally associated with cooking and nourishing

⁷² Dough McAdams, in the effort to insert culture into structural "political process" in the study of social movements, argues that only when protestors recognize the existing political opportunities that social action is possible. He labels this recognition as "cognitive liberation" (McAdam 1982:49). An example of political opportunity is the Zapatista uprising, made possible by the political weakness and the general discontent accumulated by the PRI party in the last decade. Cognitive liberation is the Zapatista's recognition of this weakness, which determines their actions of resistance as well as their ability to find national coalitions and support (See: Shultz, 1998).

⁷³ El Tiempo, February 1, 1994.

children, one could eventually classify *Las Abejas* as gender discriminatory. However, two important aspects must be considered. First, the true role of women among *Las Abejas* needs to be placed in the context of their Tzotzil culture and traditions. Second, we need to attentively observe how gender relations within indigenous communities are rapidly changing and encouraged by several external elements including foreign observers. Anthropologist Christine Eber has conducted extensive fieldwork among Tzotzil women in Chenalhó and recognizes that the total-oppression stereotype that characterizes many non-indigenous views of indigenous women is challenged by the different interests of indigenous women themselves (Eber 1999, 10). When she mentioned to a Tzotzil woman how foreign people view women walking barefoot behind their husbands with shoes as discriminatory, she replied:

It doesn't matter to me if my husband walks in front of me on the trail wearing shoes. He needs boots to work in the *milpa* [corn field], while I work at home. What matters to me is that my husband works hard and respects me (Eber 1999, 10).

These words shift the attention from popular stereotypes of gender inequality to two important themes in Tzotzil indigenous communities that crosscuts gender differences: hard work and respect. The idea of respect between spouses reflects the harmony between the community and the spiritual beings. It is only through hard work, acting humbly and respecting relationships (Eber and Rosenbaum 1993) that social and religious harmony is assured. This Tzotzil traditional view of gender relationships are certainly in opposition with the disrespect and abuse that can occur when men see women as objects to be used or properties to be owned. What elderly people present as religious and cultural traditions certainly help and inspire the community to live respectful and harmonious relationships.

The practice of certain cultural and religious traditions is also changed, however, when

people go against their value-meanings of harmony in the family and community. An example is the transformation in the traditional use of *posh* (grain alcohol) during festivities and rituals. Over the last decade, many women, supported by protestant missionaries and Catholic groups of the diocese, have substituted the traditional alcoholic drink with soda. By doing so, they reestablished the original meaning of the drink, the symbol of harmony and respect. This was being compromised by the frequent cases of domestic violence in families where the men were abusing alcohol (see Eber 1995 and 1999). It was a consequence of these women's objection to alcohol abuse, which started in the late 1980s, that now forbids alcohol use within *Las Abejas* communities.

Tzotzil people establish their ideal vision of harmonious and respectful family and community through distinct gender roles and marked divisions of labor (Eber 1995). It is typical to see men gathering firewood and working in the fields, producing corn to feed their families and cultivating coffee to sell for cash while women are busy with household chores, making tortillas, cooking beans and taking care of the children. However, these images are rapidly changing as women become aware of their situation and find support in their resistance from church activities and international presence. A woman and catechist of *Las Abejas* explains:

Before 1992 women could not even talk during meetings. It was only when *Las Abejas* started to organize their resistance that women became more actively present in the community decisions. Now we even have representatives of communities who are women in the structure of *Las Abejas* and also as representatives for the diocese... Yes, still some women prefer not to talk during public meetings and general assemblies of the organization but women are strong. Look at the strength of resistance that the women of Xoyep had against all those soldiers... Some men still do not allow women to talk or to go to the meetings. But things are changing and we now get together as women to speak about these problems and to find a solution as a community... When we decide all together as women even those women that alone would be afraid find courage to stand up. The presence of foreign women here in Acteal is giving us an example of women who travel alone and speak with even more courage than men

(Interview 31).

The liberationist approach of the SCLC Diocese supports women' resistance against *machismo-marianismo* (Eber 1999, 31) typical of the *Mestizo* gender ideology diffused all over Mexico.⁷⁴ Changes are also promoted by the example of many nuns and lay women that occupy important positions in the diocese. Furthermore, the diocese's promotion of frequent women's meeting and workshops encourage husbands to take care of their children. The presence of foreign human rights observers positively influences *Las Abejas* women. As a CPT woman observes:

In a recent workshop with women from Acteal and Xoyep I heard them saying how foreign women are an example for them of independence. Recently they asked a 40-year-old campamentista woman why she was not married and did not have children. Those different women's roles are not disruptive to the community. On the contrary, they can be helpful to sustain and accept more situations like Maria in Acteal, that although a single mother, she is an active and respected leader in the community. Initially only a few women in the community accepted her. Thanks to the support of the religious women of the diocese and of numerous NGOs. Now she is such a strong leader in the *Las Abejas* communities (Interview 15).

The encounters between *Las Abejas* women and foreign pacifist women favor the establishment of important networks for sharing of strategies and exchanging of identities. A woman from the United States was telling me how "participating with [*Las Abejas* women] in their nonviolent actions I felt empowered in my identity and history as a pacifist woman" (Interview 13). She also observed the similarity between *Las Abejas* women resisting military invasions and the US women's peace movement in the 1980's where they were sitting at the

entrance of the pentagon or blocking the entrance to a nuclear submarine (ibid). They both used symbolic blockades. Their nonviolent actions are symbolic expressions of their identities as Tzotzil-Mayan people and nonviolent resisters. Foreign and Abejas women teach each other the importance to keep their resistance at both a personal and political level. The act of standing up against morally wrong actions and laws of institutions is particularly empowering for women in general and for abused women in particular, because “it puts them in touch with their internal powers” (Ibid). For *Las Abejas* women, the struggle against marginalized conditions as poor and indigenous people is connected to their struggle against adverse oppression of women in their communities. So, women’s courage to resist military invasions is a continuation of their daily effort to step out from their marginalized positions in their communities.

According to local NGOs, *Las Abejas* women know that the government’s biggest weapon against their resistance is their system of welfare (Interview 33). This explains why the government attempts to make those women, who are the providers for food and the well-being of their children, dependent. This takes away their feeling of power, self-respect and self-sufficiency as a community. The ongoing resistance of *Las Abejas* women is directed to maintain control of their lives. That is why they refuse help from the government. They know that if you give away your resistance, you give away your freedom (Interview 13) and the person, or institution, giving them economic aid gains also the control of their lives.

It doesn’t matter if this is a government, a corporation, or a religious organization: the mechanism is the same. The free medicine distributed by the Mexican Army works in the same

⁷⁴ According to this diffuse ideology among Mexican *Mestizos*, women are supposed to arrive to their marriage virgin and remain faithful and obedient wives, in the model of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Men, instead, are generally possessive toward their wives and daughters, but they are licensed to have extra

way (Ibid.). Other government organizations offer free birth control methods...like years ago when indigenous women of the Highlands accepted to undergo surgery for birth control. Then after a few years they developed tumors and many died. Or there is the fact that women who were forced to go to the hospital because of a complicated birth found out later that the doctors had put in birth control devices without their consent (Ibid). Now women never allow the government to do surgery, and most of the time, do not allow experiments on their bodies. For medical emergencies, they refer only to the International Red Cross but the midwives are those who help them to remain in control of their bodies and continue in their resistance.

International presence is a key factor to understand the trans-formation of *Las Abejas* collective actions and identity of resistance. It has clearly supported and encouraged *Las Abejas* women implementing their role in their families, communities and organizations. It has also favored *Las Abejas*' development of their strategies and awareness as nonviolent resisters. Nevertheless, *Las Abejas*' strong identity as resisters has also influenced CPT and human rights observers to look at resistance from an historic, cultural, and religious perspective. *Las Abejas* unmistakably show how the synthesis of political goals with religious practices forms nonviolent identity of resistance. In the following final chapter we examine how politics, religion, culture, and international presence for human rights are mixed and around collective nonviolent resistance to form what I call a 'syncretic identity of resistance'.

marital affairs and excused from domestic responsibilities connected to raise children and cleaning-cooking.

CHAPTER 9:
A SYNCRETIC IDENTITY OF RESISTANCE

Bringing Syncretism Back In

Las Abejas' construction of their collective identity is better explained as a process of mixing of different frameworks. We have seen how their cultural-religious frameworks are intertwined with their political-international experience of resistance. The juxtaposition and mixing of different and at times opposing interpretations of the Acteal massacre uncover what can be best explained as a conscious syncretic process. Beyond purely psychoanalytical and theological interpretations, *Las Abejas* clearly exemplify a unique strategy of resistance as mixing, intercrossing, and juxtaposing of traditions, beliefs, worldviews and networks of communication. They do not resist modernity by simply returning to their tradition. They do not oppose globalization by simply looking at their local realities. Rather, through the acquisition of exogenous perspectives and mixing them with their own, they demonstrate how 'syncretic identities of resistance' become a strategy for entering and exiting modernity (Garcia Canclini, 1995) and taking charge of their destinies in an increasingly globalizing and dominating world. For that reason, I propose to reconsider the central meaning of syncretism to suggest how identities of resistance will be constructed in the current and future global networks.

Syncretism is a process that has to do with the mixing and synthesis of different religious forms (Stewart and Shaw 1994). However, many understand syncretism as a confusing and ambiguous concept often associated with 'contamination' of the considered 'pure' traditions (Ibid, Introduction). Others recognize syncretism as an ethnocentric label attributed to local

religious practices and ideas, or a positive expression of resistance to cultural dominance (Gort et al. 1989). Whether one attributes a positive or negative moral value to 'syncretism' it depends on the standpoint of the observer. Boff (1985) observes how those people who are privileged and stand on the dominant side of a culture tend to view 'syncretism' as "a threat to be avoided at all times" (p. 89). If, however, the observer stands in a non-dominant social and cultural situation, then syncretism is seen as a normal and natural process (Ibid).

Considering 'syncretism' from these dual standpoints leads us to make two observations. First, those dominant cultures and institutions that have been afraid of syncretism have influenced the general negative connotation of it. Second, syncretism has always been considered a problematic concept because it has been associated with a mixture of religious beliefs and practices rather than as an encounter between two or more different cultures and traditions.

André Droogers (1989) explains how most misinterpretations of syncretism are generated by failing to distinguish between the term's objective and subjective meanings. Objectively, syncretism refers to the mixing of two or more religious systems. Subjectively, syncretism implies the evaluation of the mixing process, usually from the point of view of one of the religions involved (Ibid, 7). Thus, the confusion over the meanings of syncretism and the persistence of certain negative connotations has motivated some scholars to suggest the abolition of the term (Schineller 1992; Baird 1971). The term nevertheless carries fundamental truths related to ever-present power relations in cross-cultural encounters. Therefore, in spite of the many pitfalls involved with the concept, numerous works of social scientists, theologians, and anthropologists suggest a continued usage of the term, as well as further reflection upon the syncretic processes that pertain to nearly all religiously-based identities within the contemporary

and modern eras (see Boff 1977; 1985; Schreiter 1985; 1993; 1998; Marzal 1985; Parker 1998).⁷⁵ Some have even indicated syncretism as the key concept in the interpretation of cultural patterns in the 21st century (Greenfield and Droogers, 2001; McWillie 1991).

Various authors have attempted to make a definition of syncretism from the etymology of the word. The term 'syncretism' derives directly from the Ancient Greek prefix *syn*, 'with', and *krasis*, 'mixture' that combined indicates 'a mixing together' (Steward and Shaw 1994, 3). The word also echoes the English word 'idiosyncrasy' which has the same Greek root and indicates something peculiar and individual. Indeed, syncretism is the mixing of something for the creation of something new. But the word was first used in relation to the Greek word *kretoi* to indicate "the temporary coming together of the quarreling inhabitants of Crete in the face of a common enemy (Droogers and Greenfield 2001: 27). Applied to the socio-political context of Greece at that time, syncretism meant a political strategy for reconciling ethnic and ideological differences (Steward and Shaw 1994, 3). These social and political meanings at the roots of the term indicate that the significance and problems associated with syncretism do not lie in the semantics of the term (Schreiter 1998, 62; Stewart and Shaw 1994, 3). Also, the term has changed its meanings along time and social spaces (Droogers 1989, 9).

What is constant is the understanding of syncretism as 'processes' and 'discourses' associated or in opposition to the debates on cultural purity, creolization, acculturation, inculturation, transformations, and multiculturalism (Stewart and Shaw 1994). As these cultural

⁷⁵ The major sociological work on syncretism remains that of Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw (eds.), *Syncretism / Anti-Syncretism: The Politics of Religious Synthesis* (London: Routledge, 1994). For other reflections on syncretism from a theological perspective see Jerald D. Gort, Hendrik M. Vroom, Rein Fernhout, and Anton Wessels (eds.), *Dialogue and Syncretism: An Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1989); Leonardo Boff, *Church-Charism and Power: Liberation*

trends are interpreted differently in relation to time, space, economic, political and religious view, it is more appropriate considering 'syncretism' by its processes rather than by rigid definitions (Ringgren 1969; Schreiter 1985). Syncretic processes have been generally classified according to a variety of interactions and mixings of different religious and cultural traditions.⁷⁶ My analysis of *Las Abejas* identity formation indicates a syncretic process that encompasses both the religious-cultural and the political-international dimensions. A similar extended approach could be found on the recent interdisciplinary debate around hybridism, where the dynamics of religious-cultural mixing are considered in relation to global-local economic and political transformations (see García Canclini 1995).

Particularly among cultural globalization studies, the debate on syncretism has centered around the 'hybridization' concept for explaining the formation of multi-cultural identities (Werbner and Modood 1997; Garcia Canclini 1995; Pieterse 1995; Axtmann 1997).⁷⁷ This shift toward a more 'neutral' term probably explains why the concept of syncretism has not received much attention in recent social science or religious studies literature (Schreiter 1998, 62). 'Hybridity' began as biological term to signify the crossing of two plants or species. It is now a

Theology and the Institutional Church (New York: Crossroad, 1985); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985).

⁷⁶ Robert Schreiter (1985, 146-48) recognizes three kinds of syncretic processes: (1) Where Christianity and another tradition come together to form a new reality, with the other tradition providing the basic framework; (2) where Christianity provides the framework for the syncretic system, but is reinterpreted and reshaped substantially, independent of any dialogue with established Christianity; (3) where the selected elements of Christianity are incorporated into another system. Schreiter also distinguishes these types of mixings from the cases in which no mixing occurs but only 'juxtaposition of different cultural-religious traditions that he calls 'dual religious systems'. Similarly, Leonardo Boff (1985, 89-92) recognizes six kinds of syncretism that he calls: (1) Syncretism as addition; (2) syncretism as accommodation; (3) syncretism as mixture; (4) syncretism as agreement; (5) syncretism as translation; (6) syncretism as adaptation.

⁷⁷ Numerous contemporary sociological and anthropological reflections emerging from the debate around 'hybridity' parallel what theologians have been debating about the 'syncretic processes' (see Schreiter 1998, 71 and 1985, 144; Boff 1985, 89).

term used to indicate 'mixing' phenomena at social, cultural, and even technological levels as numerous automobile factories have started the production of 'hybrid cars'. With respect to cultural forms, the term 'hybridization' is defined as 'the way in which forms become separated from existing practices and recombine with new forms and new practices' (Rowe and Shelling 1991, 231; Pieterse 1995, 49). The meaning of hybridization clearly resembles the concept of syncretism, and the 'politics of hybridity' within relationships of power and resistance (Pieterse 1995, 57) clearly reflects the politics of syncretism and anti-syncretism (Stewart and Shaw 1994). Hybridity has become a key concept in cultural criticism, post-colonial studies, and in recent debates about cultural appropriation and contestation in relation to the concept of globalization and identity (Brah and Coombes, 2000; Werbner and Modood 1997).

Notwithstanding, this shift in terms has helped theologians and social scientists to view religious forms not in isolation but as integrated (and synthesized) within the economic, political, cultural and global (e.g. intensified international networks) frames of society. In other words, the ongoing debate on hybridization helps syncretism to go beyond certain celebration of religious syncretic expressions without paying adequate attention to economic, political, and social inequalities. Obviously, focusing the debate on hybridity is also defending the positive meaning of syncretism as 'mixture' while defusing the 'contamination' thesis of those who espouse an essentialist notion of pure and authentic origin (Brah and Coombes, 2000). Syncretism, therefore, if considered as a positive process of cross-cultural relations and fusions, remains a valid concept that better expresses how religious based collective identities are negotiated and formed (Schreier 1998, 63). Indeed, the concept of syncretism better applies to the distinguished religious character of *Las Abejas'* collective identity. And, too, it better identifies the central role of religion in social movements (Bainbridge 1997; Kniss 1997; Lancaster 1988; Smith 1992;

1996a; 1996b; 1999). Furthermore, the study of 'syncretism' could further the reflections on the power of religious forms in the construction of identities between the local and the global (Beyer 1994; Robertson and Chirico 1985; Robertson 1992). Therefore, even in light of its controversial meanings, the concept of syncretism is vital for pointing out a fundamental truth: power, domination and resistance always have an effect on the identification process of individuals and collectivities (Melucci 1997; Stewart and Shaw 1994).

Syncretic Identity as Resistance

Identity should not be seen as a bound reality but as a dynamic construction in which power plays a major role. Because religious and cultural encounters are always associated with the economic, political and social spheres of life, the relationships that shape the formation of a collective identity are often violent, dominating, and intrusive. Therefore, often individuals and collectivities react to the imposing and threatening dynamics of those relationships with various forms of resistance. In these cases, resistance "can take the form of utter refusal to participate, or, if participation is forced, of withdrawal as soon as possible" (Schreiter 1998, 73). Indeed, syncretism itself is a form of resistance because it is always processed within relations of domination or exploitation. As Charles Stewart and Rosalind Shaw explain:

Syncretism has presumably always been a part of the negotiation of identities and hegemonies such as conquest, trade, migration, religious dissemination and intermarriage. The growth of a Western-dominated world economic system, however, was accompanied by the growth of a Western-dominated world cultural system in which processes of capitalism and cultural hegemony transformed not only relations of power and production but also experiences of personhood, of the body gender, time, space and religion (Stewart and Shaw 1994, 20).

Many anthropological studies of colonialism and neoliberalism, even if not explicitly speaking of syncretism, have focused on religious synthesis as a form of resistance (see: Sathler

and Nascimento 1997; Taylor 1997; Taussig 1984; Comaroff 1985). Stephens-Arroyo (1998), for example, look at the syncretic process of early Christianity and parallel it to the resistance of indigenous populations in Latin American (Stevens-Arroyo and Cadena 1995). Syncretism provided the ideological flexibility to resist Roman domination and ultimately the power to subvert the formal cognitive system of the Greco-Roman Empire and become the driving force in history (Stevens-Arroyo 1998). Considering Christianity as a social movement (see Blasi 1988) one could say that the syncretic process maximized the intellectual resources of the movement by merging different cultures, faiths, ideologies and strategies. The syncretic processes observable in the *Las Abejas*, particularly the intensification of their relation with regional and international human rights movements, has provided numerous material and intellectual tools for the resistance to globalism (or neoliberalism) (Beck 1999). Furthermore, the emerging dynamics of the syncretic identity construction process challenge certain assumptions about the homogeneous/hegemonic character of globalization (Pieterse 1995) and therefore the appropriate resistance to it (Friedman 1994, 236).

Certain imposed forms of 'syncretism-from-above' (Steward and Show 1994, 21) have been sometimes used to implement the penetration of Western capitalism and cultural hegemony (Ibid.). However, most expressions of 'syncretism-from-below' (Meyer, 1994) have been recognized as expressions of resistance associated with contemporary forms of resistance and organization called 'globalization from below' (Brecher, Costello and Smith, 2000). Numerous Latin American indigenous populations have a long history of syncretism as form of resistance, resilience and acculturation (Kicza 1993). In the new hegemonic practices of neoliberalism where the principle is no more acculturation / absorption but marginalization / exclusion, syncretism, with its dynamics of integrating / mixing / reinterpreting, offers appropriate strategies of

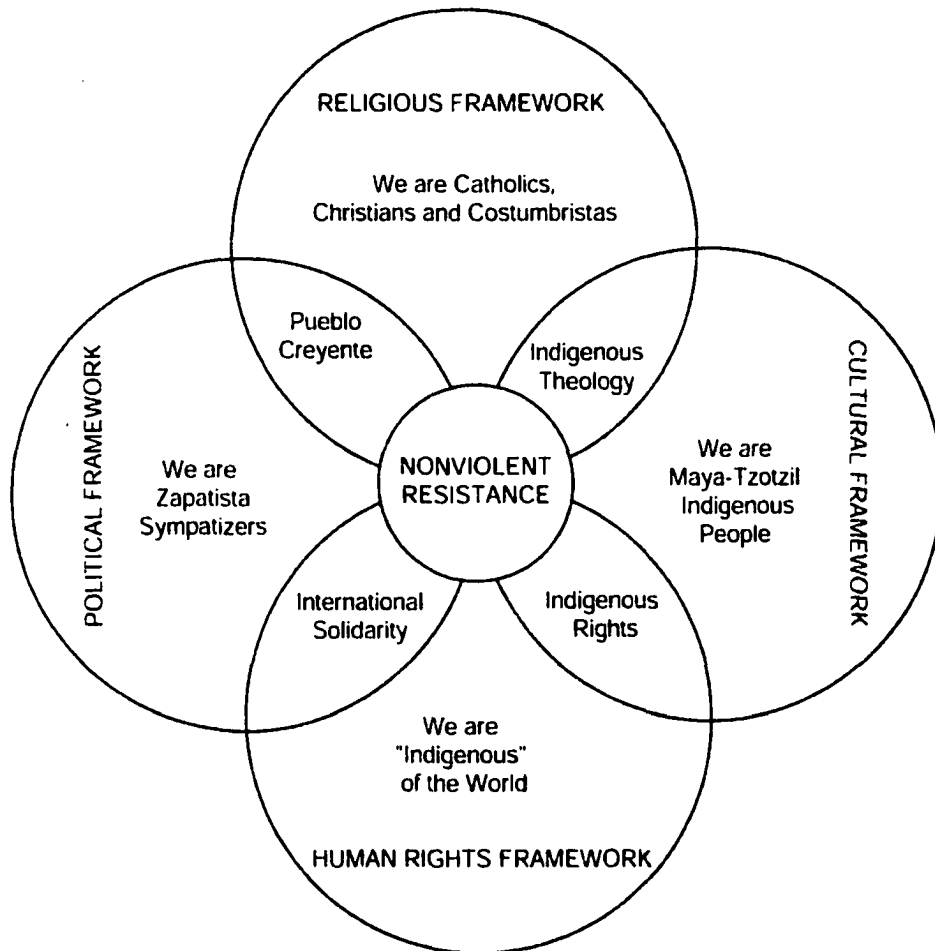
resistance and the premise for creating new alternatives. For example, Coca-Cola, one of the symbolic cultural associations of global capitalism⁷⁸, has long been used in the religious practices of the Maya-Tzotziles. At the local level, communities in resistance use Coca-Cola as an alternative to over consumption of *posh* (alcohol) and thus as a way to avoid drunkenness and domestic violence (Eber 1995). At a national level, communities in resistance have recently reinterpreted Coca Cola as symbolic of the persisting problems associated with NAFTA and the neoliberal policies of the government of newly-elected President Vicente Fox, former CEO of Coca-Cola in Mexico. At the global level, Chiapas indigenous communities in resistance intensify the resistance of numerous international organizations who recognize in the neo-imperialism of Coca-Cola, McDonald, Nike, GAP and other TNCs, the inhumanity and irrationality of neoliberalism.

Thus, the strategy used by Chiapas indigenous communities in their resistance of globalization has not been one of utter refusal but of discerned integration. In another instance, they have integrated the use of modern technologies such as the Internet and they have re-framed their resistance around themes of global concern, such as human rights and ecology (Ronfeldt et al. 1998). But they have firmly opposed inhumane and irrational effects of globalization (Ritz, 2000; Beck 1992). This dialectic between 'inclusion' and 'opposition', or of 'flow' and 'closure' (Meyer and Gerschiere 1999) is one of the characteristics of the syncretic identity formation process negotiated between 'resistance' and 'appropriation' (Hall 1997; Robertson 1997). The existence of this dialectic in social movements presupposes a clear 'consciousness' of their collective identities and actions between the local and the global (Robertson 1992, 8). *Las Abejas'*

⁷⁸ Among many other works, Mark Pendergrast's *For God, Country, and The Coca-Cola* (1993) offers a well-done analysis of the American cultural symbols used in the "coca-colonization."

syncretic identity of resistance clearly demonstrates their collective consciousness of being *un movimiento de resistencia para Chiapas y el mundo* (a movement of resistance for Chiapas and the world) (Interview, 66).

Figure 9.1: *Las Abejas'* Syncretic Identity of Resistance



(Source: Elaborated on fieldnotes and interviews, December 1999)

Las Abejas' Syncretic Identity of Resistance

Las Abejas may not be aware of certain concepts of syncretism, but in their 'practical

consciousness' they know how to incorporate cultural, religious, political and international elements into their identity as resisters. As Gonzalo Ituarte, the Diocesan Vicar for Peace and Justice explains:

Many reflections on syncretism made by theologians and anthropologists are foreign to most indigenous people. They may not know the origins or meaning of certain things but they do know how to adapt to their own life. For example, they have recognized how traditional Tzotzil prayers have the same melodies of Gregorian songs probably sung by Dominican missionaries for centuries. But they have appropriated it and used it to continue celebrating their traditional rituals otherwise repressed by the Catholic Church. Anthropologists have also pointed out how their traditional colorful customs were originally introduced by Spanish conquerors who wanted to identify them and impede them from moving to other areas. But they were able to appropriate it so that their customs became so much part of their cultural identity, affirming who they are in their resistance against certain impositions of modernity. A similar phenomenon is happening today in the assumption of products such as tennis shoes, which allows them to walk easier, or the use of modern colors and easy to work thread to make their costumes... The Zapatistas and *Las Abejas* were able to adopt certain modern instruments such as the Internet or E-mail to spread their communiqués and find international support to their resistance (Interview, 56).

As globalization intensifies the exchange of products, technology, and cultural symbols, it is understandable how 'syncretism' could be considered something unavoidable (Sather and Nascimento 1997; Steward and Shaw 1994). Yet, the syncretism that characterizes *Las Abejas* is not a mechanical effect of macro-level social transformations but a conscious identification and resistance process. They have been resisting the 'political syncretism' imposed by the Mexican government imposing assimilation under a national '*Mestizo*' identity. In spite of numerous evangelical and Catholic critiques of syncretism (see Lawrence and Rule 1999), they have been continuing their practice of 'mixing and synthesizing' Maya and Catholic religious-cultural

expressions. Contradicting certain anthropological and liberationist assumptions,⁷⁹ they have appropriated and incorporated non-indigenous meanings and instruments. An example is the use of the low-intensity warfare concept as an interpretation of the Acteal massacre or the use of electronic communication to spread their communiqués. They have also refused certain assumptions of withdrawal and separation from the Mexican political system. Instead, they have chosen to be EZLN supporters while continuing to vote and participate as a civil society. Finally, they have firmly decided to refuse armed struggle while engaging in ongoing actions of nonviolent resistance 'syncretized' with their religious faith, cultural background, political vision, and international support for human rights.

The formation of *Las Abejas* syncretic identity does not occur in a vacuum. It would be inappropriate to consider *Las Abejas*' encounters and events in abstract and disarticulated from their political, economic, international, and social implications. Clearly, *Las Abejas*' identity is formed and trans-formed in a context of aggression and victims, domination and resistance. The Acteal massacre is undeniably an effect of power, aggression and domination (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, interpretations connected to the *tierra sagrada* (sacred land) of Acteal and to the living presence of the martyrs of Acteal, indicate how *Las Abejas* have appropriated and transformed meanings in support of their identity and resistance (see Chapter 5). A person or a group that does not have the right to decide which elements it takes or it gives in a situation of cultural or exchange, this person or group is considered 'victim' or 'excluded' (Sathler and Nascimento 1997, 115). Like the rest of the neozapatista people and organizations, *Las Abejas*

⁷⁹ See Sathler and Nascimento (1997) critique to certain expressions of liberation theology that exasperate and impose a 'syncretic Indian face of God' (p.100). In their analysis, this could lead to simply replace eurocentrism by an equally dangerous 'indio-centrism', disconnected from the idea of an ethnic polycentrism.

too are deprived of their rights for land and they have been victims of human rights and indigenous rights violation. However, in relation to the international community, *Las Abejas* have been able to integrate and transform external elements for continuing their existence, demanding their rights, and reinforcing their nonviolent resistance (see Chapter 8).

The cultural-religious dimensions (Chapter 6), combined with the political-international human rights dimensions (Chapter 7), rather than defining a fixed set of characteristics, indicate four trajectories intercepted by the idea and practice of nonviolent resistance (Chapter 8) (see Figure 9.1). However, the primary goal of this analysis is not to assess the degree in which the cultural, religious, political, human rights, and resistance are mixed and integrated. These sorts of concern still constitute a source of confusion among structural-functionalist discussions on syncretism (see Droogers and Greenfield 2001, 31). Rather than referring to the dimensions of *Las Abejas*' syncretic identity as the end result of adding and mixing, my analysis considers these four dimensions as dynamics in relation to a continuing 'syncretic process'. The overall goal of this analysis is to indicate how syncretic processes should be considered and accepted as common ways of identity formation and as effective strategies of resistance. The clear result from this work is that the syncretic process also encompasses 'non-religious' dimensions such as culture, politics, and international human rights.

The *religious dimension of Las Abejas*' identity undeniably distinguishes their main characteristics as an organized community of believers. Clearly, their syncretic Maya and Christian religious beliefs and practices have been influenced by the journey of the SCLC Diocese with its dynamics of inculturation, ecumenism, participation, liberation and mobilization. Numerous authors have highlighted how the religious identity of Maya descendant people is clearly characterized by a syncretic process in which the 'Indian face of God' (Marzal et al. 1996)

represents real inculturation of Christianity and real liberation from oppression. *Las Abejas*' religious dimension reflects numerous other indigenous communities' concern to be inclusive of Maya religious practice and Christian denominations (Gossen 1993), while remaining faithful to their own ethics oriented by inculturation/liberation (e.g. indigenous theology), and participation/mobilization (e.g. Pueblo Creyente). Even if religion and culture cannot be separated, *Las Abejas*' distinguished and solid cultural identity needs to be considered separately. In addition, the three following dimensions of culture, politics and international-human rights further our comprehension of the specific dynamics of *Las Abejas*' syncretic identity.

The *cultural dimension* of *Las Abejas* refers to their identity as Maya-Tzotziles. Although one may think of Tzotzil indigenous cultural traditions as homogeneous, they actually represent a syncretic process in themselves. An attentive anthropological analysis of the transformations occurring over time on Maya-Tzotzil cultural traditions would certainly show its contingency on social and political negotiations (Brah and Coombes 2000, 9). In my analysis of the cultural aspects of *Las Abejas* identity, I recognize three fundamental relationships: (1) their sacred relationship with the land; (2) their 'living' relationship with the ancestors, the Acteal martyrs in particular and (3) the communal component, which is in relation to the practical definition of belonging (Melucci 1997). The intensification of relationships and the socio-geographical conflicting context where *Las Abejas* operate requires a continual redefinition of the boundaries of belonging. Nevertheless, *Las Abejas* continue in their process of identification without limiting their practice of including cultural diversity, which resembles the sociological characteristics of 'church' rather than 'sect' (Bainbridge 1997; Dawson 1998).

The *political dimension* of *Las Abejas* is characterized by a socio-political and economic conscientization process, which began with the Indigenous Congress of 1974. At state and

national levels, *Las Abejas* was certainly not as politically prepared as the EZLN. Yet, they have found their identity and political participation as a civil society. They have included and re-elaborated numerous strategies suggested by the EZLN and promoted by local and international NGOs. Although clear in their unarmed political struggle, they actively support the Zapatista demands identifying the EZLN cause as their cause. First with the 1994 beginning of the conflict and later in 1997 with the massacre of Acteal, *Las Abejas* found themselves politically unprepared to adequately present their political agenda. They supply those urgently needed political, organizational, and communicative skills by simply borrowing tools, discourses, and strategies from the EZLN, the CDHFBC and numerous Mexican and international NGOs. Yet they were able to combine and adapt those external elements with their own already developed skills in community decision-making, intra-community networks of communication, and using public prayers, fasting, and marching as political actions.

The *international human rights dimension* characterizes *Las Abejas*' construction of networks around human, indigenous and women rights. This perspective identifies *Las Abejas* as an indigenous organization working for the rights for autonomy and dignity. This is the dimension that most clearly defines *Las Abejas* ability to integrate international resources into their own struggle of resistance. It has also allowed *Las Abejas* to project their struggle of resistance, demands for justice and human rights, and identity as pacifist indigenous groups into the national arena. They have consciously welcomed international presence as a possibility to enrich their vision of being-in-the-world and creating essential networks of communication beyond state and national boundaries.

The *nonviolent resistance dimension* explains the merging and interaction across the religious, cultural, political and international-human rights frameworks. In their collective actions

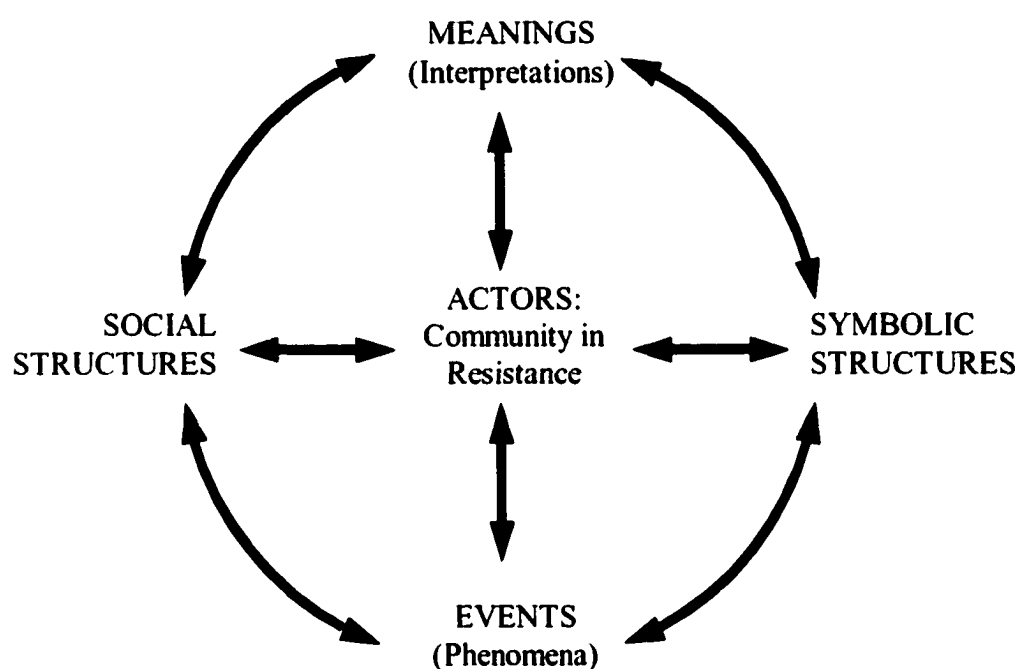
and identity as nonviolent resisters, emotions represent a sort of 'social glue' for group solidarity. They also represent the necessary force for mobilization and engagement in dangerous, nonviolent actions of resistance (see Jasper 1999; Melucci 1989; 1996). *Las Abejas'* central dimension of nonviolent resistance also explains their collective memories of resistance and the association, mixing, and compression of different episodes of resistance across time and space (Featherstone 1995; Featherstone and Lash 1995, Robertson 1992; 1995). In their collective memories as people in resistance, contemporary experiences of resistance are often juxtaposed, mixed, and synthesized with past indigenous episodes of rebellion and dissent. They also often refer their struggle in connection with nonviolent and/or indigenous struggles historically and geographically distant. This suggests how the compression of time and space, as dynamics recognized in globalization are also central forces for their resistance to neoliberalism. Nonviolent resistance also indicates how the religious, cultural, political, and international-human rights dimension merge into a unified collective identity. Still, we need to consider the dynamics and practices that lead to the formation of a syncretic identity.

Constructing Circle of Syncretic Identity

Although using different language and concerned with different subjects, most sociologists agree that actors (collective or individuals) are influenced by and subjected to social and symbolic structures (Bourdieu 1977; Berger and Luckmann 1972; Giddens 1984). Furthermore, they agree that these structures provide a repertoire of meanings that can be used to interpret events. This may lead actors to create new meanings in order to produce social change expressed at the level of economic, political, cultural and religious structures as both symbolic and social realities. These transformations refer to the meaning-production process characteristic of an identification formation process. Building on what Droogers and Greenfield (2001) identify

as 'the triangle of praxis' (p. 32-33), I call these dynamics 'circle of syncretic identity formation' honoring the dialectical relationship between collective actors, structures, events, and meanings.

Figure 9.2: The Circle of Syncretic Identity Formation



The circular routes painted by the religious, cultural, political, and international dynamics suggest the creation of new connections among traditional socio-anthropological fields. By recognizing the intensification and diversification of the networks created among different actors and structures we could advance our understanding of how meanings, and therefore identity are constructed. As new de-isolated social and cultural forms are emerging both globally and locally, especially by means of electronic communication, tradition becomes intertwined with modernity and indigenous (local) identities with international (global) identities. The intertwining of the global and the local creates networks and bridges across communities, meanings, and structures

in a way that traditional perceptions of identity are challenged. This is the case of women's internal resistance front we analyzed in Chapter 8. With the presence and connections with foreign women, *Las Abejas* women have elaborated new meanings for their roles and relationships that have lead to structural transformations at the level of family, community, and organization.

As global processes (Friedman 1994) at the level of economy, politics, culture, religion and technology continue accelerating global-local encounters, our lives, societies, and identities enter in a circle of continue reshaping and transformation. Therefore, the dimensions constituting collective identities and shaping actions of resistance must be recognized as processes. The opposing trends of globalization / localization (Robertson 1995), homogenization / diversification (Appadurai 1996), and universalization / particularization (Robertson 1992; 1997) suggest how identities have been and will always be in their construction process. Actually, as Alberto Melucci suggests, the term 'identity' in itself is conceptually unsatisfactory because it too strongly conveys the idea of 'permanence' and 'fixation' rather than 'process' (Melucci 1996, 85). The idea of 'project identity' could better describe how *Las Abejas* and numerous new social movements dynamically operate between the local and the global. *Las Abejas'* syncretic process analyzed here, especially in its construction of international solidarity around issues like human rights, is better explained by intercultural relations rather than by a culturally isolated context (see Pieterse 1995). In this perspective, 'identity' and 'syncretism' appear to be the appropriate paradigms that better describe the globalization processes (Meyer and Geschiere 1999).

Las Abejas, as a community in resistance, is at the center of the identity construction dynamics. Through intensified networks of communication made possible by numerous intercultural relations and effective communiqués, *Las Abejas* have overcome demarcations

between centers and periphery. They have been able, for example, to reframe local concerns into global 'identity spaces' such as human, indigenous, and women rights, land and ecology, liberation, autonomy, and resistance. Similar to the EZLN, they themselves have become new 'centers' for the promotion of resistance coalitions and the elaboration of concrete alternatives to the inhuman face of globalism.

Contributions of Syncretic Identity of Resistance

The four framework-trajectories of *Las Abejas* syncretic identity, particularly with their orientation to nonviolent resistance in connection with the past and present, is a unique contribution to Mesoamerican studies on syncretism. Numerous studies of indigenous syncretic processes limit the initial elements to be considered and therefore arrive at different analysis and conclusions. William Stephens (1998), for example, analyzes well how contemporary Tzotzil identity is informed by prehispanic and European ideological structures and concepts (p.49). He recognizes how the degree of syncretism "varies so much from place to place that it is practically impossible to neatly sort prehispanic concepts and structures from Europeans" (Ibid). Yet, my analysis of *Las Abejas*' syncretic identity of resistance shows how the actual elements 'informing' Tzotzil identity and the way they enter into this syncretic process, are more complex than that. *Las Abejas*' syncretic processes go beyond the historical and cultural/religious perspective and also includes the political and the international/human rights dimensions.

Furthermore, existing Mesoamerican studies on syncretism do not sufficiently recognize syncretism as a positive strategy that Maya-Catholic communities employ to resist impositions and marginalization by strengthening their collective identities (cf. Marzal 1985; Maurer 1996; 1993). The traditional Maya-Tzotzil spirituality mixed with folk-progressive Catholicism, for example, has provided *Las Abejas* with a positive mechanism for maintaining good relations

between living organizations and the spiritual world.

Eric Thompson (1970) characterizes Maya religious syncretism simply as a substitution of Christian elements for Mesoamerican religious beliefs. He defines 'syncretism' as 'seamless fusion' of indigenous and Christian elements (pp. 22-26), but he is unable to identify the integration of political elements into syncretic symbols. He proposes as one clear example of syncretism, the 1531 apparition of the Virgin Mary of Guadalupe to the indigenous Juan Diego in the very same spot where the Aztec goddess Tonantzin had formerly appeared to the Nahua indigenous people. However, he does not consider how this event became a political action of resistance in the midst of Spanish colonization and discrimination of the Indian race. We should also remember how Father Manuel Hidalgo, the priest who provided the initial spark for the 1810 Mexican Independence, organized resistance by invoking the name of the Virgin of Guadalupe while holding a banner of her indigenous face (Floyd 1996).⁸⁰

Only a few scholars have been able to recognize the political and public character of the syncretic process among Mayan descendant communities (see Farriss 1984 and Watanabe 1990; 1992; Wasserstrom 1983). John Watanabe (1990), for example, does not focus his studies exclusively on religious syncretism, but takes into account the influence that economic, political and natural ecology have in the formation of identity (p. 132). In Watanabe's view, saints, ancestors and earth lords maintain a central relevance in the community but their meanings are symbolically re-negotiated by external influencing factors (p.143). Following Watanabe's intuitions, *Las Abejas'* syncretic identity of resistance is clearly a dynamic integration process of sacred and social elements discerned by the community. Furthermore, their collective identity of

⁸⁰ The dark-skin face of the Virgin of Guadalupe has comprised a powerful part of Mexican National identity ever since.

resistance, rooted in their collective memories and encouraged by the 'blood of their martyrs', nourished by their conscious culture, faith, politics and dialogue with the international community. It represents a sign of hope and inspiration to many resisters.

Conclusion: Never Again a World Without Us

What can indigenous people teach in the increasingly globalized world? The indigenous people of Chiapas neither seek independence from Mexico nor do they oppose globalization by seeking isolation from the rest of the world. Rather, they propose a society where ethnic, cultural, religious, political, and gender relations are built upon respect and dignity. They want to be recognized for their diversity, values, and long tradition of resistance. They appeal to humanity for the recognition of their dignity as 'people of corn' who carry in their blood and skin the color of the earth. As Comandante David of the EZLN, recently addressed to Mexican government representatives:

They broke our branches, they withered our leaves and our flowers, and they cut off our trunk, but they were never able to pull out our roots, from whence, once more, have sprung life and hope for a better world for everyone... The hour of the Indian peoples has arrived, the hour of all. Those without voice and without face will, at last, have face and word, which shall resound in all the corners of the world.⁸¹

Between February 24 and March 11, 2001, representatives of *Las Abejas* participated in the Zapatista march from Chiapas to Mexico City. They also requested the recognition of their indigenous rights and cultural identity. While hundreds of thousands people from Mexico and the world were pressuring the government to listen and approve indigenous demands, both *Las Abejas* representatives in Mexico City and *Las Abejas* communities in Chenalhó marched, prayed

⁸¹ Comandante David speech in the Congress of the Union [Mexico City] 28 March 2001

and fasted as a political statement. Dialogue, which seems to be the new stage of the Chiapas indigenous struggle, is what characterizes *Las Abejas*. Their resistance is aimed to dialogue and peace with justice and dignity. Perhaps in the increasing opposition movement between *globalificos* (supporters of neoliberalism) and *globalifóbicos* (resisters of neoliberalism), *Las Abejas* offers a small example of conducting resistance aimed not to opposition, but proposition and reconciliation (see Schreiter 1992). The so-called process of *mundialización*, or globalization-from-below (Brecher, Costello and Smith 2000) could find inspiration in the process of syncretism-from-below (Kraniauskas 2000, 238), where grassroots movements borrow, interchange, mix, and reinterpret elements, strategies, codes, and identities to continue in their resistance.

Today, speaking of Chiapas without considering the existing connections with the national and international context is practically impossible. The anthropologists who came to the Highlands of Chiapas four decades ago to study the indigenous people argued that their villages were in remote and isolated areas. Today, with the emergence of the neozapatista movement, the advancement offered by electronic communication, international presence and exchange of ideas has blossomed. What was a local and hidden struggle of the indigenous people of Chiapas has now become a message of courageous resistance all over the world. Perhaps, the windows of reflections we opened with this analysis of *Las Abejas*' syncretic identity of resistance contributes to further understand that organized indigenous resistance in Chiapas is part of a larger struggle called 'politics of recognition' (Leyva Solano 1999, 11). In Mexico, the political struggle ignited by the neozapatista indigenous movement reflects global challenges for the recognition of rights and diversity, self-determination, and the just integration of indigenous populations. The San Andres Accords on Indigenous Rights and Cultures attempt to go beyond folkloristic images of

culture and ethnicity by linking cultural and ethnic identities with economic, political, and human rights dimensions.

Las Abejas' syncretic identity of resistance challenges certain restricted interpretations of 'indigenous identities' and calls for considering cultural-religious aspects of indigenous identity as inseparable from the economic and ethnic roots (land and dignity) and from their political and human right significance. In Mexico, the '*Mestizo*' identity has been historically in opposition to 'indigenous' identities, associated with being poor and ignorant. This assumption began to change as indigenous communities started to organize their resistance in 1992 with the occasion of the '500 years of domination' and in 1994 around the Zapatista rebellion. In consequence of this, Mexico for the first time recognized the presence of indigenous people and declared itself a 'pluricultural country'. But the 1992 amendment of Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution has changed neither racist relations nor the politics of exclusion. Obviously, the recognition of their cultural diversity is not enough to respect indigenous rights and identities. Clearly, there are inseparable economic, political and social rights connected to the indigenous identity.

From *Las Abejas* comes a lesson for the world. It's a lesson of bridging diversities, building mutual respect, and constructing cross-cultural dialogue as crucial strategies for social change in Chiapas, Mexico, and the world. In spite of huge obstacles, *Las Abejas* have managed to convert themselves into a politically active member of the Mexican civil society and into an internationally recognized indigenous pacifist movement. Indigenous identity is now a central issue at both level of Mexican *Mestizo* identity (Bonfil Batalla 1996) and of today's increasingly interconnected and 'syncretic' global society. The shared neozapatista demands for peace, ecology, human rights, justice and dignity are also fundamental claims for other struggles in the world. The confluence of *Las Abejas*' cultural, religious, political and human rights dimensions

along with their interpretation of neoliberalism, ethnicity, ecology and nonviolence into a syncretic identity of resistance is their 'synthesized' message to Chiapas, Mexico, and the world.

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- No. 14 Interview with a CPT member, September 29, 1999.
- No. 15 Interview with a director of a local NGO, October 12, 1999.
- No. 16 Interview with a director of Maya Vinic cooperative, August 10, 1999.
- No. 17 Interview with a former CONAI member, November 17, 1999.
- No. 18 Interview with a Jesuit priest in Chenalhó, July 15, 1999.
- No. 19 Interview with a Jesuit priest in Chenalhó, September 11, 1999.
- No. 20 Interview with a Jesuit priest in Mexico City, July 18, 1998.
- No. 21 Interview with a *Las Abejas* catechist, July 12, 1999.
- No. 22 Interview with a *Las Abejas* catechist, September 15, 1999.
- No. 23 Interview with a *Las Abejas* displaced woman, August 2, 1999.
- No. 24 Interview with a *Las Abejas* displaced woman, July 22, 1999.
- No. 25 Interview with a *Las Abejas* founder, August 02, 1999.
- No. 26 Interview with a *Las Abejas* founder, July 15, 1999.
- No. 27 Interview with a *Las Abejas* leader, November 20, 1999.
- No. 28 Interview with a *Las Abejas* member, November 20, 1999.
- No. 29 Interview with a *Las Abejas* member, October 27, 1999.
- No. 30 Interview with a *Las Abejas* member, September 15, 1999.
- No. 31 Interview with a *Las Abejas* woman in leadership, December 10, 1999.
- No. 32 Interview with a member of a local NGO, November 10, 1999.
- No. 33 Interview with a member of a local NGO, November 19, 1999.
- No. 34 Interview with a member of a local NGO, November 6, 1999.
- No. 35 Interview with a member of an international NGO, September 22, 1999.
- No. 36 Interview with a member of an international NGO, October 02, 1999.
- No. 37 Interview with a Mexican member of an international NGO, November 18, 1999.

- No. 38 Interview with a Pentecostal pastor, July 9, 1999.
- No. 39 Interview with a Presbyterian missionary in Chiapas, July 24, 1998.
- No. 40 Interview with a Presbyterian missionary, July 7, 1999.
- No. 41 Interview with a Presbyterian missionary, September 6, 1999.
- No. 42 Interview with a Presbyterian pastor in Chenalhó, August 4, 1999.
- No. 43 Interview with a Presbyterian pastor in Chenalhó, September 30, 1999.
- No. 44 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's expert on indigenous theology, July 17, 1999.
- No. 45 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, August 24, 1999.
- No. 46 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, August 25, 1999.
- No. 47 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, September 25, 1999.
- No. 48 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, November 15, 1999.
- No. 49 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, November 21, 1999.
- No. 50 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, October 22, 1999.
- No. 51 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's pastoral agent, April 26, 1998.
- No. 52 Interview with a SCLC Diocese expert on Indigenous Theology, April 21, 1999.
- No. 53 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's vicar, November 12, 1999.
- No. 54 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's vicar, November 15, 1999.
- No. 55 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's vicar, October 22, 1999.
- No. 56 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's vicar, October 25, 1999.
- No. 57 Interview with a SCLC Diocese's vicar, September 22, 1999.
- No. 58 Interview with a US Catholic Priest working in solidarity with Chiapas, March 12, 1998.
- No. 59 Interview with a Zapatista member of the Presbyterian Church in Polhó, July 13, 1999.
- No. 60 Interview with a Zapatista in Polhó, July 14, 1999.
- No. 61 Interview with Bishop Samuel Ruiz, September 10, 1999.
- No. 62 Interview with two Mexican members of an international NGO, August 10, 1999.
- No. 63 Interviews with displaced families of Xoyep, November 10, 1999.
- No. 64 Interviews with PRI members of the Presbyterian Church in Pechequil, July 10, 1999.
- No. 65 Interviews with the *Mesa Directiva* of *Las Abejas*, July 12, 1999.
- No. 66 Interviews with the *Mesa Directiva* of *Las Abejas*, October 30, 1999.
- No. 67 Interviews with the *Mesa Directiva* of Zapatistas in Polhó, August 3, 1999.

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VITA

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