



“¡Tierra y libertad!” A 100 Year-Old Echo for the Maya of Chiapas

By Sharon Healey

A review of Conflict in Chiapas: Understanding the Modern Mayan World. By Worth H. Weller. North Manchester, IN: DeWitt Books, 2000. 152pp.

Prior to the January 1, 1994 uprising of the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) the indigenous peoples of Chiapas, Mexico’s impoverished southernmost state, were largely oppressed by their own government and ignored by the rest of the world. The Zapatistas, (named after the mustachioed hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata), and their eloquent, pipe smoking spokesperson, Sub-Comandante Marcos, changed that by turning the international spotlight on the woeful living conditions of Mexico’s indigenous population.

In his book Conflict in Chiapas: Understanding the Modern Mayan World, Worth H. Weller seeks to explain the roots of the conflict, dispel some of the popular myths as to its cause, and paint an accurate portrait of the indigenous people, descendent from the Mayans and still practicing many of their traditional customs and beliefs. Weller’s book draws from his experiences as a human rights observer during a ten-day trip to Chiapas in 1996, and two subsequent trips, the last in the summer of 1997. In the first five chapters, Weller tries to convey a sense of the Mayan people and their impoverished existence, as well as the exotic beauty of the highland city of San Cristóbal de Chiapas. He describes scenes from his travels: “snacks of fresh oranges in a dirt floored hut” in a jungle village accessible only by a muddy foot path; girls in “bright brilliantly covered and spotlessly clean dresses,” who carry babies on their backs and sell Zapatista dolls with tiny carved machine guns; “sun roasted men and women” who “trudge the roads with their machetes” and dry their small crops of coffee on storm-water aprons, “tenderly turning the beans by hand,” and twice-a-day meals that never vary from the menu of “corn tortillas, rice, and squash when in season.”

Weller’s descriptions reawaken memories for this author. Like Weller and thousands of other foreigners, I too went to Chiapas in the wake of the Zapatista uprising to learn more about the indigenous people of this impoverished state. I trudged many of the same muddy footpaths between tiny Mayan villages as Weller, and sipped coffee and flipped through Zapatista literature at the Human Bean, a coffee-shop owned by Denver resident and activist Kerry Appel, who is mentioned in Weller’s book. I wandered through the streets of San Juan Chamúla, led by Weller’s guide, the

suave and articulate Pepe Santiago, who explained the intricate web of competing interests that resulted in sporadic violence and the expulsion of evangelists from the town, while flicking pesos to the throngs of children chanting “Pepe! Pepe!” trailing after him as if he were some modern day Pied Piper. Like Weller, I meandered through the town’s crumbling grave yard in the shadow of its giant blue cross, surrounded by tiny children with even smaller siblings strapped to their backs, who fought to sell me beaded bracelets and chewing gum.

In chapter six, Weller describes the tension simmering between the villages of San Juan Chamúla and neighboring Zinacantán. In San Juan Chamúla, the majority of residents practice an odd mixture of Catholicism and traditional Mayan religion. The floor of the church is strewn with pine needles around thousands of white candles and coke bottles filled to various levels, over which parishioners in brightly colored hand-embroidered clothes pray under the painted eyes of a dozen or so “good” saints. The “bad” saints, I was told, were behind the church, having inexcusably lost their heads during an earthquake some years ago. (The scene was made all the more surreal during my March 1998 visit by the Church’s incessant playing of “Jingle Bells” through the sound system).

In contrast, Weller explains, the residents of Zinacantán practice traditional Catholicism, and the Catholic priests who instruct them have set up a number of cooperative weaving arrangements allowing weavers to sell their wares at distant markets. These subtle differences are overshadowed by the two villages’ struggle to control the trucking of Coca-Cola, fabric and other goods throughout the region. Trucking licenses are usually given as political favors. The economic power struggle between the two towns has been exacerbated by the arrival of Protestants, who have upset the prominence of the Catholic Church by converting villagers. The two villages have responded by driving Protestant converts out of town. The tensions between the two villages serve as a microcosm of the greater conflict playing out in Chiapas where religion, poverty, economic power and political corruption all form a part of the web of tensions that gave rise to the Zapatista rebellion.

In chapter seven, Weller describes the role of paramilitary groups in fueling the Chiapas conflict. Weller uses the terms *guardias blancas* (white guards), *pistollas*, (gunman) and paramilitaries synonymously, although originally they had distinct meanings.¹ The *guardias blancas* were originally armed peasants hired by cattle ranchers to protect their land interests from indigenous people who sought to reclaim their land. I understood the depth of the indigenous peoples’ commitment to reclaiming their land after meeting with representatives from a farming cooperative during my 1997 visit. During the meeting a thin man in worn clothes and scuffed boots, identifying himself as a *campesino*, gave us a detailed lesson of the history of the land dating back two centuries, and including the dates and locations of each parcel of land confiscated by the government, the Catholic Church and non-indigenous ranchers, as well as the efforts of the indigenous farmers to reclaim it. My group was then escorted to a small stone building that had been converted to a makeshift shrine. Upon the wall were approximately 30 photographs—the images of some faded to near obscurity, the newer

¹ See the article: “The Covert War Waged by Gunmen, White Guards and Para-military Forces” at http://www.springtraining.org/revolt/mexico/reports/white_guard.html

ones still bright—of the cooperative’s members who had been murdered by the White Guards in retaliation for their efforts to reclaim their land. In case members of the group retained any doubt as to the nature of these deaths, our host passed around photographs depicting the latest victims, bullet riddled bodies slumped, bloodied and lifeless, in the doorways of their sparse homes.

Today’s paramilitary groups are mostly made up of landless indigenous young people who are frustrated by their inability to support themselves, and who are drawn to the prestige that comes with paramilitarization and the weapons and power that follow from membership in a paramilitary group. Paramilitary groups have received both tacit approval and actual support from members of the PRI, the party that ruled Mexico for more than 70 years until losing the presidency to the Vicente Fox of the PAN party during last year’s elections. Members of paramilitary groups use extortion for money in exchange for a guarantee of security within the community. Paramilitary groups have been organized by the Mexican security apparatus, which sought out poor indigenous communities in areas that displayed the greatest tensions between the EZLN and the PRI. Between May and September 1997, the paramilitaries began campaigns of terror and harassment of entire villages, forcing over 7,000 people to flee the violence and sporadic violence continues to this day.

Weller describes this connection between the PRI and paramilitary when discussing the December 1997 murder of 45 indigenous peasants, mostly women and children, in the highland community of Acteal, approximately 12 miles north of San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Many of those killed were members of an organization called *Las Abejas* (The Bees), who supported the Zapatistas. During the five hours that the murders were being carried out, a number of local authorities were notified but none came to the assistance of the community.² A number of local municipal authorities affiliated with the PRI were subsequently arrested.

Chapter nine is written by Ben Weller, who is also credited as one of the book’s photographers. This chapter explains the economic context of the Zapatista struggle. Weller discusses how neo-liberalism and the passage of NAFTA and other free trade agreements have opened new markets for foreign investors with whom the Mexican peasant farmers cannot compete. Weller also explains the nature of the Zapatistas as a social group grounded in a leftist, democratic ideology that has at its core the principle of equality of all people. The notion of equality is further explored in the following chapter, which addresses the feminist movement within the Zapatista struggle. In the indigenous villages of Chiapas, where the custom of dowry still exists, women do not choose their husbands and often have a subservient role in the household. They are saddled with the household responsibilities of caring for children, preparing the meals and washing clothes by hand, often in addition to working the fields. However, within the Zapatista movement, men and women are theoretically on equal footing. Women hold positions of leadership in both the civil and military wings of the movement. In fact, it was a 26 year-old Tzotzil Mayan woman who led the 1994 New Year’s day assault on San Cristóbal de Las Casas. Yet the tension between the traditional Mayan way of life and the growing feminist movement within Zapatista communities was evident during my

² For a comprehensive understanding of the massacre of Acteal, see *Camino a la masacre, informe especial sobre Chenaló* by the Fray Bartolomé de Las Casas Center for Human Rights (in Spanish).

1998 visit to the autonomous community³ of Ché Guevara in the hills outside of San Cristóbal. When my group of visitors asked why there were no women among the 20 or so councilmen that presided over our meeting, we were told that there had been several women on the council previously, but that they had become “too tired” to fulfill their council responsibilities. “But we do have two young women who had shown an interest in joining the council,” the president told us. “Where are they now?” we asked, hoping to interview them about the emerging sense of sexual equality in indigenous communities. “They are in the kitchen preparing your lunch,” the council president informed us.

In the final chapter and epilogue, the authors draw parallels between the Maya of Chiapas and the Sioux of South Dakota. Both groups, they observe, are locked in a struggle for land with a government focused on fostering outside investment. Both the Maya and Sioux have enlisted the help of organizations such as Christian Peacekeepers (who are treated in chapter eleven) and are trying to form solidarity movements. While the Wellers claim that “nothing is different” between the Dakota Sioux and the indigenous peoples of Chiapas (“only the names have been changed”), some differences do seem apparent. The Mayans’ principle struggle seems to be for economic survival, while the Sioux are more concerned with the preservation of their spiritual practice and the hundreds of traditional burial sites on their land. Some Sioux have mixed views on the government’s plans to develop tourism in the area, particularly if they are allowed to build casinos on their reservation.

Those already familiar with the conflict in Chiapas may find Weller’s book to be thin on analysis. There is no mention, for example, of what the Zapatista are specifically demanding. They initially put forth a list of 35 demands that included free and fair elections, the resignation of the federal executive, recognition of the EZLN as a belligerent force, autonomy for indigenous communities, and improved services and medical and education facilities in indigenous communities. There is also no discussion of how Mexico’s rampant corruption and lack of a true democracy has contributed to the marginalization of the indigenous people.

Nor is there any discussion of the failed San Andres Peace Accords. These accords, negotiated between the government and EZLN in 1996, set forth a number of constitutional reforms that needed to be made in order to comply with the agreements, including legislation guaranteeing autonomy, the protection of indigenous lands and natural resources, the rights of indigenous peoples to political participation, the right to elect their own authorities and exercise authority according to their local norms, and the protection of indigenous people from discrimination. A legislative body, the Cocopa, drafted an initiative embodying the agreements on Indigenous Rights and Culture for constitutional reform. Although both sides reportedly accepted the Cocopa draft,

³ Autonomous communities were created in response to the militarization of the region and government interference in communities thought to support the Zapatistas. These municipalities no longer recognize government-imposed authorities. The villages install community representatives according to indigenous custom and elaborate their own laws based on the equality of the inhabitants. The government sees these communities as a threat to its authority and has sent the army to forcefully dismantled several autonomous communities while its attempts to dismantle others have been thwarted by women and children, armed with rocks and sticks, who block the army’s advance.

then-President Zedillo issued a counter-proposal that was rejected by the EZLN, which brought all negotiations to a halt. After taking office President Fox submitted the San Andres Accords to Congress in December 2000.

Despite these shortcomings and some minor factual inaccuracies,⁴ Weller's book provides and eloquent and very accessible introduction to the indigenous people of Chiapas and the complexities contributing to their on-going struggle for rights and recognition. The extensive list of sources in chapter eleven provide a rich source of material for those who want to pursue the topic further.

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⁴ For example, Weller states that the Acteal massacre occurred on Christmas day when it actually took place December 22nd.