Mixtec Evangelicals

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Introduction

The indigenous Mixtec people of Oaxaca, Mexico, have developed complex, multisited transnational communities rooted in the ancestral villages of their homeland, the Mixteca region. The ways that these transnational communities are maintained are tightly connected to the tradition of usos y costumbres. This system is a hierarchy of alternating civil and religious cargos, or posts, which must be taken up by representatives of each of the families in the community. This includes people outside of the village in the far-ranging transnational communities. By continuing to recognize and participate in this system, Mixtecs help to create and maintain transnational networks. While there is a good deal of literature on transnationalism, the Mixtecs stand out in their allegiance to and participation in the civil-religious hierarchy that is generated by usos y costumbres. This requires that each member of the community participate in a series of Catholic rituals, focusing on saints, which make up half of the hierarchy. It is precisely by maintaining the hierarchy that they have maintained the communities (Besserer 2004).

Imagine my surprise, then, when I discovered in 2001 that there were four congregations of Mixtec Pentecostals in Santa Maria, California, an hour’s drive from my home in Santa Barbara. When I found out that there were many Mixtecs who were converting to non-Catholic churches, my interest was piqued. Evangelicals absolutely reject the Catholic saints as false idols. In addition, they do not drink alcohol, an important ingredient in all Mixtec Catholic festivities. In fact, Pentecostals reject all of the religious side of the civil-religious hierarchy. It seemed apparent
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That, once Evangelicals returned to their villages, they were on a collision course with the Catholics, as well as with the major traditions that are the basis for Mixtec transnational communities.

My colleague Alberto Hernández at El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, in Tijuana, Mexico, knew many Mixtecs in Tijuana, and he began to research Mixtec Evangelicals there. He found congregations in Tijuana, but many more in the Valley of San Quintín, about four hours south of the border in Baja California. I decided to go to San Quintín to conduct fieldwork there. What I found was that there were many, many Mixtecs living in the valley, and a good percentage were Evangelicals. This was turning into a long-term project.

My interest in Evangelicals in Latin America had begun during my dissertation research with indigenous Mayos in Sonora. There, I found two types of religious movements: Evangelical Protestantism and a millenarian, nativistic movement in which only Mayos participated (O’Connor 1979). My analysis of these divergent reactions to social change made me realize that cultural and social change is actually brought about by the decisions of many individuals. Of course, they must have reasons to change, and the social and cultural milieu must encourage and allow change. In Sonora, all of these conditions held.

With the publication of two books (Stoll 1990, Martin 1990) declaring that Protestantism was growing rapidly in Latin America, I turned again to my interest in religious change. I conducted a study of Evangelicals in Santa Barbara, where I met the Mixtec Evangelicals. Between 2001 and 2012, I conducted fieldwork in many locations where non-Catholic Mixtecs live, both in Mexico and the United States. I eventually conducted research in most of the West Coast communities of Mixtecs in both countries.

In my research, I have always looked for explanations for behavior. I believe that such concerns as reflexivity (Marcus 1994:384–385) and the importance of recognizing the role of anthropology as part of the Western colonization of non-Western cultures are essential parts of fieldwork. I also agree with Geertz (1973:14) that anthropology is “a developing system of scientific analysis”; thus, my interest in the scientific explanation of behavior.

While the word subject is still used by academic review boards, the feeling I have toward the people I come to know well in the course of my work is that they are colleagues trying to explain to me, the dumb American, what for them are obvious realities. One of the most important of these realities at present is religious change. I claim only to have approximated an understanding of it.

A basic understanding of the history and the social organization of the Mixtecs is necessary before even beginning to document such change. Most people in Mexico have abandoned the practice of the ancient traditions of usos y costumbres. The
maintenance of these traditions is the basis of the transnational networks that make up every Mixtec community. The role of the Catholic Church has been pivotal in this system. The presence of non-Catholics has had major effects on the system, but it has not destroyed it completely. The traditional system, the churches to which some Mixtecs convert, and the processes of conversion, are discussed in chapter 1.

But beyond merely documenting religious change, I wanted to find out why people change their religious beliefs. In the case of the Mixtecs, why are they changing when their very identity is supposedly wrapped up in Catholic rituals that are hundreds of years old? Why risk rejection and even expulsion from their villages? The fact is that the process of economic globalization has been affecting the Mixtec communities to an even greater extent than the religious conversion of their members. Conversion is actually part of a much larger process that includes economic marginalization, migration, a confrontation with modernity in its many manifestations, and the formation of transnational communities made up of complex networks that span the territory from the Mixteca to the many places where Mixtecs are found today. Modernity, globalization, and the ways that they impinge on Mixtec life, as well as Mixtec responses to these processes, are discussed in chapter 2.

My field project involved research in four different communities in the Mixteca region of Oaxaca. While three of the four villages in the project are all rural, all poor, and all Mixtec, the ways that they have experienced emigration, return migration, and the religious conversion of their members have contributed to distinct outcomes in the relationships between Catholics and non-Catholics. Chapters 3 and 4 discuss these communities. The fourth community in my study is a neighborhood of the city of Huajuapan de León, in the Mixteca region. Here live members of a village who were expelled by their fellow villagers because they were non-Catholic. In the new community, everyone is non-Catholic. The ways that they have developed and adapted provide a contrast to the processes found in the other villages. This community is discussed in chapter 5. Chapter 6 is a summary and discussion of the similarities and differences among the four communities.

In addition to my fieldwork in Oaxaca, I conducted research in many of the places to which Mixtecs migrate, which are also the places where they tend to convert to Evangelical religions. These include communities in the states of Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California, in Mexico, and the states of California, Oregon, and Washington, in the United States. It is in communities such as these that the transnational networks mesh the members of Mixtec communities together even after many years of separation. While other migrant groups tend to acculturate and assimilate to US culture, the Mixtecs remain within their transnational communities, all tied to the Oaxacan villages where the members were born. Within the larger transnational communities, the converts to non-Catholic religions make up a
smaller web rather than a separate entity. They participate in the lives of the villages to the same extent that Catholics do, within the limits that their religious affiliations allow. Chapter 7 contains the results of this work.

In chapter 8, I summarize and draw some conclusions on the work presented in the earlier chapters.

In my research, I used the standard anthropological methods of participant observation and key informant interviews. I attended non-Catholic church services as well as Catholic fiestas. I conducted life history interviews with non-Catholic pastors as well as members of the Evangelical churches in each community. I interviewed the political leaders of the villages I worked in. I spent time in peoples’ houses, just talking about general topics. I interviewed Catholic priests. In addition to this fieldwork, I have amplified my findings with statistics from the Mexican census, as well as with information from other studies.

What I found from my research among Mixtecs is that, indeed, the Catholics reject the non-Catholics, saying that by not honoring the saints they are destroying the community. The non-Catholics maintain that the rejection of the saints is necessary, whether or not it destroys the community. As the saints are from the devil, they must be eliminated. The non-Catholics reject all aspects of the religious organization of the community because it is Catholic, it includes drinking and dancing, and it is a waste of money. In some cases, the Catholics have expelled the non-Catholics from the villages and prevented them from returning. In others, there are now sizeable numbers of non-Catholics in the villages themselves.

While conducting field research in the four communities, I found that religious change varies from one to another. In one village, where the non-Catholics are approaching 50 percent of the population, a kind of agreement has been reached, where each group lets the other worship as they will. In another, there is a great deal of animosity between Catholics and non-Catholics, and there is no rapprochement. I believe this is because the percentage of non-Catholics, while growing, is still considerably lower than 50 percent. A third village has an even lower percentage of non-Catholics. Here there is an undercurrent of unhappiness, but, in general, the Catholics are in charge. The fourth community I studied is a neighborhood of the city to which a group of converts fled when they were expelled from their village. This community gives an idea of what life is like in a place where there are no Catholics at all.

In each of the communities I studied, migration is a major factor in religious conversion. It is migrants who first converted, and it is migrants who returned to the villages to try to convert their relatives and neighbors. It is in the migrant stream that a large percentage of Mixtec converts live today. They are part of the transnational communities that define their lives. Although they are steadfastly anchored to their
villages, non-Catholics are not willing to give up their religious commitments. To the contrary, they would like to see all the members of the villages become converts. At the same time, most remain outside the villages themselves. The risk of conflict over religion is at least part of the reason for this.

Globalization has led to migration away from the Mixteca region. Migration, in turn, provides the context for individuals to decide to convert. In the beginning, no one converted before leaving the Mixteca. Circumstances of migration led to their conversion in the migrant communities. Thus, globalization caused migration, and migration provided the contexts for conversion. The combination of these processes led to the formation of transnational communities composed of all the members of each village and smaller transnational networks of non-Catholics within the larger network.

Unlike some communities (see, e.g., Dow 2001), conversion in the Mixtec villages is not a way to eliminate the entire traditional social system. Although non-Catholics reject the Catholic aspects of this system, they still participate in the political aspects. Importantly, they still maintain their membership in the transnational communities that are the basis of Mixtec life today. There are hundreds of thousands of Mixtec migrants in Mexico and the United States. Each of them belongs to a transnational community whose focus is a village. This is a remarkable adaptation of traditional culture to the globalized world that Mixtecs inhabit. It has served them well, mainly because the migrants, for the most part, were born in the village. The extent to which the system will be maintained by the children of these migrants remains to be seen. However, the tenacity and the creativity of the parents may well continue, in some form, in the generations still to come.

NOTES

1. Alberto and I have collaborated on several projects over the years, he in Baja California and I in various sites. The results of our collaboration on Mixtecs can be found in Hernández and O’Connor 2013.

2. For my initial research on Mixtecs, I received grants from the UCSB Interdisciplinary Humanities Center, UC MEXUS, and the UCSB Office of Research. My subsequent funding came from the Fulbright-Hays Faculty Research Abroad Program, which allowed me to spend a year in the Mixteca region conducting research in four different communities. Another grant, from the UC MEXUS program, funded multi-sited research with some parts of what might be called the Mixtec diaspora. Alberto Hernández collaborated with me on the second MEXUS grant.

3. There are also complex traditions of belief and practice that vary from one village to another. Some of these date to before the Conquest, and some intersect syncretically with
the folk-Catholic cargo systems (see Monaghan 1995:97–166). As the present multi-sited study focuses on transnational processes and religious change, the kind of full-bore, detailed research that we find in John Monaghan’s work was not possible for each village. In any event, non-Catholics reject every belief that is not found in the Bible; these include precolonial traditions as well as those introduced by the Spanish.

4. During my stay in Oaxaca, I affiliated with the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social in Oaxaca City. I am very grateful for their support.
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