Mixtec Evangelicals

O'Connor, Mary I.

Published by University Press of Colorado

O'Connor, Mary I.


For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/48436

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1883821
INTRODUCTION
Along one of the winding, hilly roads leading out of Huajuapan de León, there appears a small sign saying “Colonia Sinaí.” The Colonia Sinaí was built by Mixtec Pentecostals who were expelled from their village, San Antonio Yodonduzu Monte-verde, in 1987. I learned of this community in 2003 from Hermano Heriberto of the Centros Bíblicos, the organization that has helped relocate three different groups of people expelled from their villages. I knew that many expulsions of this type had occurred in Chiapas (Cantón Delgado 1997), and some in Oaxaca (Montes García 1999; Marroquín 1996), and now I saw an opportunity to learn about one of the expelled communities in the Mixteca.

It is clear that the Centros Bíblicos have been instrumental in the formation of the communities of the expelled in the Distrito of Huajuapan. In the three cases where the Centros intervened, the expelled hermanos have constructed new, cohesive communities on land on the outskirts of the city. In each case, the Centros helped the hermanos buy land on the installment plan, offered advice in construction and other tasks, and generally provided moral support. Colonia Sinaí is one of these groups of expulsados (expelled ones).

THE VILLAGE
Like the communities described in chapters 3 and 4, San Antonio was 100 percent Catholic until migrants who had converted to non-Catholic religions began
returning. The first convert returned in 1980. Hermano Alberto had converted in Mexico City, where he had gone to find work in the late 1970s. He was one of the earliest Mixtec converts, or at least of those who returned to their villages. Mixtecs who migrated before 1980 mainly went to Veracruz and Mexico City rather than to northern Mexico. In the Mixteca in 1980, non-Catholics were very rare, and most villagers had never left their municipios. Very few, if any, of the people of San Antonio had ever heard of other religions besides Catholicism. There had been almost no returning converts in the entire region up to that time.

As soon as he returned to San Antonio, Hermano Alberto began spreading the gospel, and villagers began listening. Hermano Alberto’s appearance in the village was something very new, and potentially disruptive. Soon, more migrants returned from different parts of Mexico and the United States. Some had converted to other religions. They joined together and began holding services in Hermano Alberto’s home. In 1987 the accumulated non-Catholics built a church out of sheets of oil-infused cardboard. By then there were fifteen families of converts.

The villagers were shocked by Hermano Alberto’s proclamations. They were outraged at his denunciation of the community’s saints. They realized that his views represented a threat to their way of life. The interest that some villagers showed in Hermano Alberto’s message was also a surprise to the majority. They worried about the growing number of converts in the village. The hermanos offered to take on more nonreligious cargos instead, but the Catholic majority refused to consider this compromise. The offers of the hermanos did nothing to eliminate the threat of the collapse of the entire way of life of the village. The social process is one that includes both the religious and the nonreligious aspects of the community, and the fiesta expresses the culmination of the year’s events, religious and otherwise.

The leaders said that those members of the community who did not want to participate in the life of the community had no right to expect the privileges of community membership. There were arguments among the villagers over who had rights to water, electricity, etc. There was a high level of animosity between Catholics and non-Catholics.

THE EXPULSION

In February of 1987, the Catholics began to speak of forcing the hermanos to leave. Rumors spread, and tension grew. One Sunday, the Catholics acted. According to one of the members of Colonia Sinaí, “se levantaron la gente” (the people rose up). There were 130 households against the fifteen convert households: “con palos, machetes, salieron, amenazándonos” (they came out with sticks, machetes, threatening us). In one account, some of the Catholics had firearms and shot out the tires.
of a vehicle owned by a missionary from the United States who was trying to help the hermanos. The Catholics drove the non-Catholics from the village and would not let them return. Those who tried were put in the village jail and expelled again. According to a resident of Sinaí, the Catholics said “hasta el raíz los vamos a sacar” (we are going to get them out by the root).

The hermanos were not allowed to take any of their possessions. Their animals and land were taken over by their relatives, who were among those who had expelled them. Their houses were looted, and then allowed to fall into ruin. None of the hermanos returned for many years.

**After the expulsion**

At the time of the expulsion from San Antonio, there was only one Centro Bíblico in Huajuapan. The members of this group were predominantly villagers who had been expelled from another community. One of these loaned a house to the San Antonio non-Catholics. All 15 families were “amonotados” (piled in a heap), like goats in a pen, in the one house. They stayed there from February to June 1987. Then the Centro Bíblico bought the land that is now the Colonia Sinaí. The hermanos agreed to pay for the land over time. They subdivided the land into 10-meter-square plots and allocated a plot to each family. In this way, the communal traditions established over centuries in the village continued as the new community took shape.

At that time, there was nothing on the land or around it. It was far away from the city itself (which has since grown to meet the Colonia). The highway was dirt. Everything was “monte” (scrub land). Not even buses came by. The hermanos had to walk downtown with their propane tanks to buy gas. There was no electricity, and they depended on the ubiquitous _pipas_ for water. At first, there was only one cistern for everyone in the colonia. Each family was allotted two buckets of water per day. Here we see the continuation of the communal ethos established by village customs: everyone had equal access to the water. In 1991 the colonia got electricity, and in 1995 it was connected to the municipal water system. After this point, the community no longer controlled these utilities, and each household is now responsible for its own bills. A step away from community and toward modernity.

During this period, the hermanos learned how to construct buildings by building their own houses. The first houses were crude, made of cardboard or _carrizo_, a reed that grows plentifully in the area. Slowly, and with help from the original Centro Bíblico, the colonia began to take shape. Today, it consists of a circle of houses, with the church as a node in the circle. The church is situated on the street that is the entrance to the colonia. Next to and across from the church are the homes of the original non-Catholics, including Hermano Alberto and his family. There is also a
store across from the church. In the space defined by the church, the houses of the leaders, and the store, many communal activities take place. This area could be seen as the central plaza of the community, although for outsiders it is simply a section of a dirt street.

Most of the houses are made of concrete, with concrete floors. This contrasts with houses in the three villages of chapters 3 and 4, where concrete houses, the most expensive to build, tend to be in the minority. The hermanos maintain their own separate space, defined by the church and the houses, their own language, and their own social system. They contribute tequio and volunteer for various other community committees. They call each other “hermano” and “hermana,” brother and sister. They work communally on the church building, which must constantly be expanded to fit the increasing number of members. It is a very cohesive community.

Since 1987 the number of families of hermanos in the colonia has grown from the original 15 to 35. Some of this growth is internal, as the children of the original settlers marry and start their own households. Other, more recent members of the community are converts from San Antonio Yodonduda Monteverde, the village that expelled the hermanos; still others are from Llano Grande, a village near San Antonio. All the hermanos in the colonia speak Mixteco; the fact that they all originated in the same municipio means that they all speak a mutually understandable version of the language. The children born into the colonia grow up speaking both Mixteco and Spanish (see table 5.1). It is interesting to note that 91 percent of the adults are bilingual, in contrast to the municipio of Huajuapan as a whole, which is 7 percent bilingual (INEGI 2000). There has clearly been a concerted effort to preserve the Mixteco language, while encouraging everyone to learn Spanish.

The cohesiveness of the colonia is similar to that of a small pueblo, with the added advantage of the residents actually having originated in a small pueblo. But the present-day solidarity of the colonia is perhaps most similar to the villages as they were before the beginning of religious change in the Mixteca. Those villages were 100 percent Catholic; the colonia is 100 percent non-Catholic, and all are members of the same church. The inhabitants of those villages were in agreement regarding religious as well as social traditions, and this is what constructed the tejido comunal (the communal weaving)—that today is perceived as having been torn in two by religious dissidents. In the colonia, those dissidents are now constructing a tejido comunal of their own, more closely woven together than those of the villages that have experienced religious disagreements. The small size of the community—fewer than fifty households—is an additional factor in the cohesiveness of the colonia.

Although the first convert was a returned migrant, and although many migrated in past years, today few hermanos leave the colonia looking for work. This is because they have hopes of finding and keeping work in Huajuapan. The pastor
of the church in the colonia said, “It’s sad to be far from our family—it’s not right.” This is a view that only those with economic stability can enjoy. In the Colonia Sinai, economic stability comes from living in the city, where more jobs are available. However, employers commonly view Evangelicals as good workers who arrive on the job on time and are very honest. At the same time, networks of converts provide information about jobs and recommendations of prospective employees: if one Pentecostal is a good employee, this person’s recommendation will help another get a job. In fact, there are Catholics who complain that the hermanos are a “mafia” because they are very cohesive and only help each other.

In 2004 I conducted a survey of twenty-three of the thirty-five households in the colonia. I was assisted by the granddaughter of Hermano Alberto; she is fluent in both languages and works as a seamstress in the colonia. The information from that survey is the basis for table 5.1. One of the results of the survey is that 61 percent of those in the survey are employed. In San Lucas, Yososcuá, and San Juan Diquiyú, the figures are 26 percent, 33 percent, and 16 percent, respectively.

There are several reasons why the colonia is so much wealthier than the other communities in the study. One very important one is that the hermanos do not spend money on fiestas, alcohol, or other activities seen as frivolous. Another is that there is a construction boom in Huajaupan, fueled by migrant remittances and returning migrants who want to build bigger and better houses with the money they have saved. The coincidence of learning how to build houses while building their own and the church has allowed the hermanos to take advantage of the employment available for construction workers: 39 percent of those surveyed are employed in construction.

### Table 5.1. Language and religion: Colonia Sinaí

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Population over 5 years old</th>
<th>54</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mixteco only</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixteco and Spanish</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish only</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Catholic</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

THE RETURN TO THE VILLAGE

In the period between 1987 and 1999, certain legal changes were made at the level of the national government; these had important repercussions in the villages of the Mixteca. There were also political changes in the Municipio of San Antonio
Monteverde, where the Sinaí hermanos originated. In January of 1992, the national constitution was modified to state that “the Mexican nation has a pluricultural composition” and that the law will protect “specific forms of social organization,” among other indigenous cultural traditions. Indigenous communities have taken this to mean that they have the right to defend their right to exist as a collective group. In the Mixteca, this has been interpreted as the right to expel those who do not participate in the specific form of social organization known as usos y costumbres. In 1998 the Oaxaca state constitution was changed, and language similar to the federal laws was added (Diario Oficial del Estado de Oaxaca 1998:519–26).

In July of 1992, the national Law of Religious Associations was approved. This sweeping change in national policy on religion included a statement that every individual has the right to practice his or her own religious belief and shall not be discriminated against or receive hostile treatment because of it. Importantly, the law holds that “the person shall not be obliged to give personal service or contribute money to the upkeep of a church or religious association, nor shall any person be forced to participate in rituals, ceremonies, religious feasts or acts.” This law, in the context of indigenous communities that practice usos y costumbres, is completely at odds with the constitutional guarantee of indigenous traditions.2

It was during the course of these legal changes that residents of Colonia Sinaí returned to their village. In 1999, two people went back to the village to convert people there. They believed that the law guaranteeing religious freedom to individuals gave them the right to proselytize, and gave members of the village the right to refuse to participate in the Catholic aspects of the usos y costumbres system. At the same time, the village leaders believed that the changes in the constitution supported their assertion of their right to expel people who refused to participate. The stalemate was broken in 1995, when the Mexican National Commission on Human Rights declared that although the Indian communities have the right to uphold their customs, they could not use this as an excuse to violate individual rights. Thus, individual rights, an aspect of modernity, superseded the right of the traditional community to enforce its rules. When the hermanos began returning to San Antonio in 1999, the Catholics again tried to expel them, saying that the law in their village is their law of usos y costumbres. But the hermanos “se defendieron con la ley” (defended themselves with the law).

The national and state laws were not the only changes that were felt in the municipio of San Antonio Monteverde, however. Before 1999 the presidente municipal was in favor of the expulsions. After 1999 the new presidente was neutral on the subject. Thus, as in Chiapas (Garma Navarro 2002; Cantón Delgado 1997), the expulsions were not entirely based on religion, nor has the change in attitude on the part of the municipio leadership been predominantly religious. Rather, both
national and local level legal and political changes have made for a compromise. The traditional system continues to some extent in San Antonio, but hermanos are only required to take on cargos associated with the government, not the church. Now, there are village leaders that are members of the Centros Bíblicos, the church of the residents of Colonia Sinaí. As of 2004, there were twenty-three families of hermanos living in the village, more than had been living there prior to the expulsion. Thus has the village, comprised of the people in Sinaí, the Catholics in the village, the non-Catholics in the village, and the people in the migrant stream, come to reconstitute itself and continue its existence as a community.

**DISCUSSION**

The type of conflict that ended in the expulsion of non-Catholics from San Antonio Yodondzuza Monteverde is probably a thing of the past in the Mixteca. One reason for this is that the number of non-Catholics has increased tremendously since 1980, when the first convert returned to San Antonio. There are now non-Catholics in most villages, and the Catholics have had to deal with their refusals to participate in the Catholic aspects of the traditional system. In addition, large numbers of Mixtecs have migrated to areas where there are many other churches besides the Catholic Church. Thus, the existence of non-Catholics is no longer a shock. Another reason for the lack of expulsions is the changes in the legal system.

Some students of religious change in Mexico might assume that the expulsados would completely abandon the community model of the Mixtec village. Being a community entirely made up of non-Catholics, they might reject all of the traditions of the villages. However, the continuity of tequio and the (secular) cargo system gives the lie to such assumptions. As in the villages, the members of the Colonia Sinaí have picked and chosen elements of modernity that suit their lives as Mixtecs, and remained Mixtecs in the bargain. All speak Mixtec. The children speak Mixtec. All identify strongly with the village that expelled them. Most are wage earners in the city. All live in cement houses with cement floors and indoor plumbing. However, a large majority speaks Spanish as well as Mixtec. While their community in Huajuapan has many more modern amenities than most villages, the basis of their identity is still the village. Now that there are many converts in the village, it has come to be seen as a social whole. The attraction of being members of a traditional community is clearly greater than the appeal of modernity as a complete system. The ability to decide which elements of modernity to embrace gives them a great deal of freedom, and they have decided to remain indigenous in many important ways.
NOTES

1. Pipas are water tank trucks that are found all over Latin America. They deliver water by a hose from their tanks. Many people depend entirely on pipas for their water, but this water is much more expensive than water delivered through a municipal water system.

2. The section on the two legal changes at the national level, and their implications for indigenous communities, is based almost entirely on Carlos Garma Navarro’s (2002:38–39) discussion.