Mixtec Evangelicals
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Concluding Remarks

MIXTECS IN THE MODERN WORLD-SYSTEM

The casual visitor to a present-day Mixtec village might be forgiven for thinking its residents are far removed from the modern world. But Mixtecs have been part of the world-system since they were colonized by the Spanish in the sixteenth century. Their relationship with the world today is still one of neocolonial dependency, although the Spanish empire is long gone. Mixtecs began migrating for work in the nineteenth century because the world market for cochineal—a product they exported for profit—collapsed. World market forces have been at the bottom of their migrations ever since. Today, in the Mixteca region, corn imported from the United States is cheaper than the corn Mixtecs produce; they are forced to sell for less. Many must emigrate in order to survive. In northern Mexico, they invariably work on farms that produce food for US tables. They are found in at least half of the states of the United States, arguably the most global, modern nation in the world. But their status in the United States is that of a minority within a minority, at the bottom of the social and economic ladder. This situation has more to do with multinational corporations, international agencies, and multilateral banks than with Mixtecs’ abilities, goals, and aspirations.

The response to this onslaught of globalization has been to form transnational communities that maintain the village as the core of the social structure. Networks spread over the territory between the village and the wide expanse of land on both sides of the border. The members of the community, wherever they may be, are connected to the village by cell phones. As long as the members of the community...
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continue to give service—to participate in village activities, even from far away—they maintain their rights as villagers.

TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Transnational communities are responses to impersonal global forces beyond the control of individuals or even villages. Religious conversion, on the other hand, is a personal decision made by individuals. As Bernice Martin (1998:128), in her discussion of Latin American Pentecostals, points out,

As individuals, especially if they are near the bottom of the social pile, they cannot alter the macro-structures within which they have to contrive their own survival. But they can alter their responses to these limiting conditions. In converting to Pentecostalism they empower themselves in ways which have concrete consequences for themselves and for society.

Religious change has created major upheavals in Mixtec culture. First, the non-Catholics, upon returning to the villages, began to proselytize, saying the saints had no power. Then they refused to participate in the Catholic parts of usos y costumbres. They began to make converts. They threatened to destroy the cultural traditions based in part on the celebrations of saints in the Catholic Church. The fiestas were at the heart of Mixtec village life. In fact, many migrants specifically worked to earn money to sponsor the fiestas, in order to maintain their traditions. The disruptions caused by Evangelicals led at first to some being expelled from their villages. Many remained in the migrant stream in order to avoid ostracism from their fellow villagers. Despite these disruptions, all the members of the villages, or at least those who choose to participate in village life, have supported the maintenance of the community structure. Even the members of Colonia Sinaí, who were expelled from their village, continue to honor Mixtec traditions such as tequio and continue considering themselves members of the village.

The ways that Mixtec converts behave within the transnational communities, and the responses of those communities, differ according to the impacts of globalization and migration on each village. Some examples of the variety of responses by different villages to the influx of return migrants and Evangelical members are found in chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this book. These examples by no means exhaust the possibilities. Surely each village has its own pattern of resistance to and acceptance of change.

MIXTEC VILLAGES AS TRANSNATIONAL COMMUNITIES

Their allegiance to the villages is what makes Mixtecs different from most Mexican migrants. It is also what has led to the creation of transnational communities. They
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are transnational today because most Mixtec migrants live in the United States. But the strength of village community networks has characterized them since they first began to migrate. Those early migrants to Veracruz and Mexico City returned to their communities for the fiestas and continued to give service in order to maintain their membership in the villages. The same is true of the migrants to northwest Mexico. Today, the pull of the village remains strong among Mixtec migrants. Instead of allowing themselves to be swallowed up in the impersonal maw of this new great transformation, they remain members of their tiny communities thousands of miles away.

TRANSNATIONAL STUDIES, GLOBALIZATION, AND RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

Transnational communities became, beginning in the 1990s, the subject of numerous studies. Research on transnational processes, which actually began with the analysis by Michael Kearney and Carole Nagengast of Mixtec farmworkers, has had a trajectory not uncommon to social science topics (Kearney and Nagengast 1989). First, a flurry of activity and publications (see Levitt and Jaworsky 2007), followed by heavy criticism (e.g., Glick Schiller 2005; Faist 2010) and a subsequent decline in studies. To be sure, Kearney and Nagengast correctly described Mixtecs as having transnational communities, and no doubt there are others elsewhere in the world. However, as Ghassan Hage (2005:467–68) points out, the term has been used to describe groups who do not really constitute communities. Rather, these are said to be “imagined communities,” much like those of purported diaspora populations. At this point, the term transnational is like the term diaspora: so broad as to be almost meaningless (Glick Schiller 2005:4.42–43). Yet like diaspora, transnational can be useful if carefully defined.

According to Thomas Faist (2000:207): “Transnational communities characterize situations in which international movers and stayers are connected by dense and strong social and symbolic ties over time and across space to patterns of networks and circuits in two countries.” This is a fairly accurate description of Mixtec transnational communities. Their transnational networks are based on dense, strong social and symbolic ties, which have developed over time and across space. The networks connect movers and stayers in two countries, Mexico and the United States. Like most studies of transnational phenomena, this is exactly a description. It does not explain.

More recently, Faist (2010:1669) has called for the application of world-system theory to this process: “[T]ransnational flows in the context of migration strongly coincide with the economic and derivative political power asymmetries
of the world economy. Dense and continuous transnational flows build upon migration systems which in turn are structured by core-periphery relations.” This is more explanatory: economic and political power asymmetries between core and periphery are the reasons why transnational communities develop in the first place. Mixtecs had no choice but to migrate, and their response to the effects of migration is the transnational community. Taken together, these two quotes from Faist describe and explain the processes Mixtecs have gone through over the past century.

In creating transnational communities, Mixtecs have had to change the focus of their identities to some extent. The traditional focus was always and exclusively the village. The idea of a Mixtec “nation” was absent (Miguel Bartolomé, personal communication, 2012). Now, in the migrant streams, Mixtecs from different villages recognize each other. They still importantly identify with their villages, but another level of abstraction has been added. To this, the concept of indigenous peoples brings yet another level of abstraction, wherein Mixtecs recognize the similarities, for example, between themselves and Zapotecs to the exclusion of non-indigenous people. This consciousness of indigeneity has, in turn, resulted in the formation of indigenous organizations such as FIOB. This group, while still a majority of Mixtecs, also includes non-Mixtec Oaxacan indigenous people. The idea that a member of a Mixtec village could feel solidarity with a Zapotec or a Triqui is recent, and is a direct consequence of transnational migration.

SELECTIVE MODERNITY

The use of cell phones and the installation of sewage systems may be indications of modernity, but modernity is more than plumbing. As discussed in chapter 2, modernity is the major underlying paradigm for Europe and the United States, and its adoption by people who are not in these places is the main goal of such projects as economic development and missionary activity, among others. Modernity includes individual freedom of choice over the rule of the community, democratic institutions, religious freedom, and, importantly, progress in all its manifestations. To what extent are these conditions found in the Mixtec transnational communities discussed in this book? As I have pointed out, this varies from one community to another. However, in general there is no freedom of choice over the rule of the community. In order to maintain their membership in the villages, individuals must comply with the requirements of the community. Democracy exists but in a limited way: in most villages, women do not participate in the political process; they cannot vote in the annual elections of leaders. However, the process of migration has affected this also. In some villages, there
are not enough men in each family resident in the village, so the women must represent the families. Whether or not this is true modernity remains to be seen, however. It is likely that men will maintain their power for the foreseeable future. On the other hand, women do not have equal power with men in the United States, either. But at least they can vote.

Religious freedom is what the non-Catholics want, while the Catholics want to remain under the control of the Catholic Church. Here is the crux of the matter: Are non-Catholics more modern than Catholics? Certainly there is more freedom of individual choice in the non-Catholic churches: the individual is responsible for his/her own salvation and each person must decide as an individual to be baptized. However, this individual freedom is limited to religion. It does not translate to an overall embrace of modernity. Meanwhile, institutionalized rules of impersonal bureaucracies, other elements of modernity, are precisely the means by which the modern world imprisons Mixtecs at the bottom of the social hierarchies in each country where they live. Their role in the bureaucracy is as cogs in a wheel rather than as individual participants.

In all the villages in this study, the basic pattern of village organization remains decidedly nonmodern. A sewage system may be paid for by money earned as dependent migrant labor, but the community builds the sewer system with its own labor. Perhaps the term “selective modernity” can be used to describe this combination of modern and traditional behaviors. In this process, some elements of traditional culture are decoupled from others. At the same time, some aspects of modernity are integrated into the mix. Mixtecs do not want to swallow the modernity package whole. They merely want to accept those modern elements that suit them, that allow for the continuation of what is at bottom a traditional system. They do not reject all of modernity, however. They are merely selective in their adaptation to their situation in the modern world. They consciously decide what modern behaviors to accept and what to reject.

Unlike some other indigenous groups (e.g., Dow 2001), Mixtecs are not trying to eliminate the traditional social system by becoming non-Catholics. Certainly the religious aspects of the cargo system are slowly being reduced in size and scope, but this is the work of Catholics as well as converts. Both groups agree that the cultural weaving of the traditional village is no longer in existence once there are non-Catholics there. But the essential elements of village life remain: the community controls the natural resources, which cannot be sold to anyone outside the community. The villages are run by members elected by the general assembly. Corvée labor and service to the community are required for village membership. These traditions are recognized and honored by state and federal governments.
TOWARD A GENERAL EXPLANATION OF RELIGIOUS CONVERSION

In the Mixtec case, there is a clear causal relationship between globalization, migration, and religious change. While this is the case with many other communities as well (e.g., Jaimes Martínez 2009; O’Connor 2009; Robledo Hernández 2009; Camargo Martínez 2004), it is by no means universal. For example, Garma Navarro (1987) describes the importance of missionaries in the conversion of Totonacas in Puebla. Andrade’s (1999) discussion of religious conversion in Ecuador identifies the effects of land reform and other economic displacements as the contexts for religious conversion. In his study of conversion in the Sierra Juárez in Oaxaca, Gross (2001:204–29) did not find that migration significantly influenced conversion. But he points out that even in this fairly circumscribed area, the patterns of conversion, conflict, and conflict resolution vary considerably from one community to another. Today, there is an increasing number of studies on Evangelicals in Latin America (e.g., Rivera Farfán and Juárez Cerdi 2007; Rangel Lozano 2011; Rodríguez López 2011). Apparently, we are on the way to developing a general understanding of these phenomena. The present work aspires to contribute to this general understanding.