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Béne wha lhall, béne lo ya'a: identidad y etnicidad en la Sierra Norte Zapoteca de Oaxaca

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ENGLISH SUMMARY (resumen en inglés)

Béné Wha Lhall, Béné lo Ya'a. Identity and Ethnicity in the Sierra Norte Zapoteca of Oaxaca, by Manuel de Jesús Ríos Morales.

The aim of this doctoral thesis is to contribute to a better understanding of the issue of ethnic identity of the Zapotecs in the Sierra Norte of the Mexican State of Oaxaca, and to contribute to an indigenous criticism aiming at decolonizing cultural memories and social realities in México and the Americas. In discussing the reality of a specific indigenous people today, we are confronted with important questions, not only: ¿Who are the Zapotecs in the Sierra Norte of the Mexican State of Oaxaca, what are their characteristics?, but also How do they represent themselves and construct their cultural identity in their own terms? How do the processes of identity formation take place within a context of imposed and stigmatized 'alterity'? How are forms of ethnic representation created and recreated in a situation of coloniality and social inequality? How is ethnic identity constructed in a framework of modernity and globalization: which role do cultural memory and worldview play in this?

We have to take into account that identities are not fixed but dynamic products of historical perceptions and self-perceptions, constructed in the dialectics of similarity and difference, continuity and change, and transmitted through complex processes of socialization, as expressions of a social, cultural and/or political project and praxis.

The author approaches this field and offers his considerations not only from an academic background but also from insider insights through shared experiences, belonging to the Zapotec people and being an active participant in this community. The latter condition implies what has been called an 'emic perspective', or rather a wish to analyze and develop a critical view on these issues – and the existing literature – from the people's own point of view. One of the quests is to uncover or construct the relevant Zapotec concepts and expressions.

The thesis starts with a descriptive overview of *la Sierra Norte Zapoteca*, the territory of the Highland Zapotecs in the Mexican State of Oaxaca, an area of great diversity and inequality, with, at the same time important forms of ethnic-cultural continuity, resignification and resistance to colonial impositions. Traditionally local conditions were determined to a large extent by a rural economy of agricultural production, combined with diverse non-specialist activities, mainly for auto-consumption and subsistence. More recently, however, important changes are taking place. Many communities have become inserted in the (inter)national context of modernization and globalization. Some communities, with more resources, e.g. wood, have developed productive projects. Also large scale migration is now an important factor. Consequently people in the whole area – and outside it - are involved in a multiplicity of labor activities. This obliges us to give up the traditional essentialist characterization of this indigenous people as mainly rural and conservative. On the other hand many life experiences still take place in the context of a specific, religiously charged view of space-time-life, in close connection with the (sacred) land and universe. The community is a determinant symbolic sphere, in which identity is shaped through shared life ways, experiences and social ideals. A traditional system of uses and customs takes the form of a consciousness of communality, which also continues in other areas of agency and in different life conditions.

The thesis proceeds with discussing modernity, globalization and migration as parts of one large process that affects the communities deeply. On the one hand it has a negative impact (traditional knowledge, ideals and cultural traits being lost); on the other it has provoked a reaction: new cultural consciousness, efforts to strengthen local organizations, unity of the community and ethnic identification processes on the local and international levels. With Deleuze and Guatari we may speak of the deterritorialization y reterritorialization of identities. This process – the identity reconfigurations in the context of modernity and migration – is of vital importance to the new generations, looking for historical roots, social memory and symbolic universe when constructing a new, inclusive discourse. Ethnic identity becomes connected with social revindications, leading in the political arena to the phenomenon of ethnicity.

Trying to apply a postcolonial perspective on the indigenous condition we encounter the problems of essentialist vs. relativist / constructivist / dynamic views on identity. Here Spivak's concept of "strategic essentialism" is a valuable means to take a political position while doing justice to both the presence of traditional culture and to the modern social transformations and processes of hybridization.

Reviewing the construction of Zapotec reality from several viewpoints implies confronting the traditional Zapotec concepts of life, religion, sacred time and ritual landscape, kinship and social structure, with external paradigms, such as the different anthropological currents, and the developing postcolonial theory. A crucial principle in Zapotec cultural memory is the connection of humanity to a sacred cosmic order. On the other hand, the condition of coloniality is basic for the understanding of socio-economic realities, multiple existing forms of discrimination and injustice, but also of used scientific paradigms. The representation of indigenous peoples has been and still is constructed from a viewing them as subaltern "others". Therefore modern studies still qualify them as "minorities", ethnic groups" etc. instead of recognizing and redignifying them as "peoples" with a right to self determination.

In discussing the concept of identity further in more general terms, due attention is paid to the contributions of postcolonial thought (Said, Bhabha and others). The focus on a people as 'self' should not be understood as a return to an idyllic past, not as neo-Indian separatism. Ethnicity is conceived as an effort to recuperate those philosophical, epistemological and communitarian principles that have defined the cultural horizon and civilizing process of the peoples in question, in brief to recuperate a culture's humanist view to construct a more human world in all senses. Social identities are powerful imaginaries, which are not defined by the presence or absence of certain traits or attributes, but are, metaphorically speaking "rhizomatic" processes, in permanent reconfiguration and interaction with others. Through these processes a people connects its symbolic universe, cultural memory, social ideals and historical experience with a struggle for ethnic dignity and a political project to define its own future.

From this line of thought the thesis examines the particular condition of the Zapotec people, elements of its cultural-linguistic heritage, as well as the consequences of coloniality and global modernization in a capitalist and neocolonial context. In the XXIst century it is necessary to develop new strategies and mechanisms in defense of that heritage (including land and resources) as a base for survival as a people. Self-determination is the main orientation point in the defense and reconstruction of identity, but also in a new project of developing a just society, a nation that is respectful of its peoples and their human rights.