Indigenous Peoples, Memory and Envisioning the Future: A Brief Multidimensional Study

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Abstract: This paper offers a brief overview that seeks to make a series of approaches to an undeniably complex topic: the struggle of indigenous peoples in the context of colonialization processes worldwide, national and local scales. This survey first characterizes, systematizes, and relates the efforts made by some 350 million people worldwide (including more than 15 million indigenous people from Mexico) to safeguard their unique historical and cultural identity in the face of their respective mainstream society over the past sixty years. This will provide a basis to look at the challenges that a country like Mexico faces in preserving the spatial or territorial matrix that guarantees the sustenance and survival of these peoples, and their beliefs, traditions, ways of life, and deep knowledge regarding the conservation and regeneration of natural resources for the benefit of all of human society. At this level of analysis, this study seeks to gain deeper insights into strategies for preserving and regenerating habitat used by an ancestral Zapotec community living in the Chinantla Highlands region, in the northern mountain ranges of the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. The paper concludes by highlighting the strengths of a historical memory that hews to epistemological categories utterly different from those prevailing in Western culture in the day-to-day engagement of these cultures with their land and their natural surroundings.
Keywords: Aboriginal peoples, scales of complexity, cultural singularity, traditional knowledge, conservation and biodiversity.

Background and Worldwide Perspective

Ascertaining the historical transcendence for human society of the contributions made by indigenous communities worldwide over the last 60 years is not easy. It cannot be overlooked that most of these peripheral spaces have undergone similar processes of dispossession, destruction, exploitation, and human rights violations in the different stages of colonialization that subjugated nations and continents for centuries: some in more distant times, as in the case of the Americas, India, Southeast Asia, Africa, and Oceania.

In a critical analysis of colonialism, its background, ideology, theoretical framework, and recent effects, Alain Gresh, a French journalist nationalized in Egypt, explained at the beginning of this millennium how 19th-century theories of evolution and positivism fed into the main ideas that bestowed superiority on the White race and justified its right to "civilize" other nations of Africa and Asia. He quotes the words of Paul Rohrbach, who oversaw German immigration into

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Southwest Africa, from his book *German Thought in the World*, published in 1912. Rohrbach wrote, "No philanthropy or racial theory can convince a reasonable person that the preservation of a tribe of kaffirs in South Africa … is more important for the future of humanity than the expansion of the great European powers and of the White race in general" (see Gresh 2001, p. 1). Gresh shares his surprise at the reasons adduced by certain African non-governmental organizations when they submitted their proposal at the 2001 World Conference Against Racism, Xenophobia and Intolerance that colonialism and racism be declared "crimes against humanity" warranting the right to reparations in favor of the countries that were targeted.

As researcher Maivân Clech Lâm, professor at the City University of New York, presented, the international context around 2004 was also quite explicit. Referring to the domination and control of the more recent decolonization processes that took place after World War II, she wrote:

> *…the Bretton Woods scheme has served its authors exceedingly well. Global capitalism runs the world, generating excessive wealth for some, comfortable sufficiency for many, and unbearable poverty for the rest, all the while rearranging natural and cultural landscapes at will …. In the process, what ties there remain in the postcolonial world that still bind human beings close to the lands of their birth—ties spun from cultural communities' intimate knowledge of, and profound dependence on, their natural environments— are mindlessly slashed, if not severed"* (2004, p. 130).

Why was this so?

These are communities, peoples, or nations who had and have had a long-standing history linked to a specific territory since before the invasions and who constitute sectors that are marginalized or excluded from the societies that remained as oppressors after the independence processes. The Canadian historian Ken S. Coates (2004) offers a broad overview of the history of these peoples precisely because many studies lack solid historical criteria. This lack of criteria leads most historians to present indigenous nations as victims of the modern world when a longer-term perspective would shed light on the positive aspects of their discontinuity, persistence, and struggle for cultural survival. Coates affirms that the comprehensive history of these peoples is driven by the interaction of outside processes that force them to produce changes and internal processes that tend toward cultural continuity. These are peoples who have preserved the development of these spaces and transmitted their territoriality (as well as their ethnic identity) to the new generations through their autochthonous languages, cultural patterns, legal systems, and institutions.

In the worldwide context, aboriginal peoples' most significant concerns after the 1960s would be the right to self-determination and the territorial control of their resources (Mander, 1991). This explains why they have so insistently looked for ways to be heard in a wide variety of forums, separate from the discourses of the government representatives of the countries where they live. Their aim from the beginning was to secure the legal and institutional protection that comes from international coverage to at least mitigate the pressures and plundering that capitalism would unleash on their resources throughout the 20th century with the acquiescence and complicity of the nation-states.

As Professor Juan Diego Castrillón Orrego (2006) of the University of Cauca, Colombia, points out:

Indigenous peoples are participants and actors in the creation of novel uses of the international system, making it take on functions that go beyond simply projecting the interests of the nation states. The international and national dimensions entered into a new relationship in the late 20th century, giving rise to a context where indigenous peoples have articulated their age-old claims (2006, pp. XXIV-XXV).

Many things have changed the scenario for indigenous peoples; they now belong to "the permanent agenda of the international system, and of the international human rights system in particular, where they are accompanied by a movement of organizations that work on the international scene, seeking to reframe or position approaches to globalization issues that diverge from those that existing economic and political powers are trying to impose (2006, p. XXXIII).

Throughout these negotiations, native peoples would always regard the nation-state with suspicion and misgiving, as if they were dealing with an enemy. The neoliberal frameworks promoted since the 1980s and through the first two decades of the 21st century only exacerbated that perception. While the States trumpeted the principle of sovereignty to escape outside scrutiny and intervention when they violated their own populations' human rights, they looked the other way as transnational financial capital trampled their sovereignty by plundering indigenous resources and territories and imposing their conditions within the countries' borders.

Elements of Change and Resistance Strategies

It was these state-sanctioned intrusions and the threats of the global market to take control of native peoples' territories that motivated their leaders and activists to turn to international forums, in the hope that International Law – the League of Nations in the early 20th century and then the United Nations (UN) – could help them to stand up to these outside forces and regain control over their resources and the habitat that had forged their identities. U.S. Professor Bernard Nietschmann pointed out that of the 120-armed conflicts in the world in 1987, three quarters involved the struggles of native populations to defend their freedom or autonomy from powerful nation-states. "The aim of these conflicts and aggressions was and continues to be the same: to break the idea of indigenous peoples' communal land ownership and to evict these natives from the lands of their ancestors" (Nietschmann, 1987, p. 34).

In the later stages of an epic worldwide struggle, the forces of Western economic development are assaulting the remaining native peoples of the planet, whose presence obstructs their progress. In some places, the assault is violent; elsewhere ...., It is legalistic. Given the lack of public awareness and the misreporting by the media, a "final solution" for the native problem is deemed likely. Upon the ultimate outcome of this battle will depend whether a living alternative world view, rooted in an ancient connection with the Earth, can continue to express what is insane and suicidal about the Western technological project (Mander, 1991, p. 263).

This explains why Maivân Clech Lâm (2005) characterizes the overall situation as fundamentally illogical, linking it to a type of *inveterate colonization*. Before 1992, for example, indigenist policies in Latin America aimed to assimilate indigenous peoples and discourage anything that suggested a genuine process of indigenous identification with a political agenda. Thus, in Guatemala, Mexico and Argentina, there were no Indians, and in Colombia, there were no Afro-Colombians. At the same time, an idea of nationalism based on the glorious indigenous past of each country was extolled; indigenous culture was given a prominent place in museums, folklore, and tourism, but actual living indigenous people were marginalized socially and politically (Lâm, 2005).

This also explains the stark disconnect between the land's meaning for native peoples and the commodity value assigned to undifferentiated spaces by the local elites, the conquering nation-states, and transnational corporations. The need to survive as *distinct* peoples or nations was inextricably tied up with their right to occupy their territory and control their natural resources. This forms the indispensable physical basis without which it was not possible, and still is not possible, to achieve their profound goals, i.e., the right to enjoy, develop and pass on their culture to their descendants and perhaps to the rest of humanity.

For this reason, for the past several decades, indigenous representatives have insisted at multiple international forums that territoriality is a non-negotiable requirement or condition, a *sine qua non* for their peoples' physical and cultural survival (their hardcore). Consequently, self-determination and control over their territories and natural resources would be upheld as universal principles and included in the memory of International Law institutions, for example, in Covenant No. 169 of the International Labor Organization (2020), which replaced Covenant No. 107 dating to 1959, leaving behind the goal of assimilating indigenous people into the modern world; the American Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples of the Organization of American States (OAS) (2020); and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples passed by the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) in September 2007 (UN Declaration, 2020).

Today, the struggle of indigenous peoples has modified the world's political and cultural landscape. It has also succeeded in planting a series of promising instruments in international law. Lam perceives a gradual transformation of international legal practice that goes beyond the scope of so-called "treaty" law, governed by treaties between states and inter-governmental organizations. This dimension consists of norms and rules that consider aspects of life in a "global village" that tend to flow and establish relationships (like communication channels and broad connections between indigenous peoples).

International legal practice is building an actual world community that is proving to be more dynamic and versatile than the official repertory of diplomatic relations between nation-states. A plural body of law is developing outside the formal treaties between states, where cross-sectional encounters and interfaces are generated between indigenous communities and experts, creating a setting where the communities' territorial prerogatives can be negotiated. One example of this shift in focus and criteria is the requirement that the World Bank now imposes on its mega-projects: before implementation: they must consider the opinion of the people who will be affected, especially when the projects are intended for, or will operate in, indigenous communities.

This is an unprecedented shift in policy that implicitly acknowledges the communities' rights to their vital space or habitat and the management of their resources. Another example is the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, which since 2002 has actively intervened and institutionalized these interfaces between indigenous communities, states, UN agencies and bodies, and different non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Discussion: The Mexican Panorama Under the Sign of Neoliberalism

Within this overall sketched-out framework, the main social and legal changes that have taken place in Mexico in recent decades can be situated. First was the constitutional reform of 1992, which introduced a simple statement recognizing Mexico as a pluricultural and multi-ethnic nation. This reform can be attributed to the governing class's tendency to copy ideas and formulas that were in fashion at the time on the international scene. Then came a more momentous change: the reform of Articles 1 and 2 of the Constitution in 2001; this represented the legal and formal culmination of the Zapatista armed indigenous uprising, which burst onto the scene in 1994 and fought for the recognition of the cultural specificity of Mexico's sixty-eight indigenous peoples, their collective rights and the free determination of their decisions, while also upholding nationalist ideals and interests that went against the mainstream.

These transcendent structural changes sought to safeguard the country's cultural wealth and diversity by setting up a comprehensive legal system for indigenous rights in Mexico. Its limitations and political constraints notwithstanding, the system was designed to gradually incorporate the applicable international norms that Mexico had endorsed, with an eye to reconciling the institutions and norms of positive internal law with those of the legal systems of the original indigenous peoples.

Despite these efforts and milestones that Mexico's indigenous peoples and communities achieved in the formal sphere, it cannot be overlooked that they have continued to face ongoing obstacles and threats to the full exercise of their rights, as well as roadblocks that impede their access to their resources and culture. The dominant culture's emblematic disdain for them, its oblivion, would never actually disappear during the neoliberal regimes (1982 to 2018). On the contrary, the native peoples were subjected to a logic of poverty, dispossession, lack of opportunities, and emigration that was even more implacable than the conditions affecting the poorest segments of the country's urban population (by far the majority) resulting from the lack of economic growth and the stubbornness of foreign investment and global finance. Human rights consultant Mikel Berraondo explains the dynamic in plain language:

> *In the final analysis, the clash between privatization and human rights centers on two factors: first, the struggle for dominance between commercial rights (free market, privatization, maximum profits) and human rights (defense of life, culture, justice, freedom, equality) in international political institutions, and second, the emergence of a new international actor, seemingly excluded from the protections and guarantees of the human rights system, and yet increasingly influential and powerful at the expense of states, which have slowly surrendered their own sovereignty. These new actors—transnational corporations—wield their preponderant economic power to bend states' public policy planning and international decision-making to their will, guided only by their commercial and economic interests, blissfully detached from the states' obligations to abide by the law and fulfill their responsibilities to their citizens* (2005, pp. 271-272).

This paradox continues to plague Mexico to this day, creating an impasse that directly undermines the structure of the state, which has found itself unable to fulfill its international legal commitments in different areas, such as indigenous rights, or to incorporate them into its internal

regime. In the time frame in question, the Mexican state relinquished its central role and put itself at the service of a rapacious national and international minority. This has led to gnawing uncertainty for indigenous peoples because, at any time, their rights can simply be trampled for the sake of national or foreign interests amid pious appeals to globalization and the public interest.

A similar dynamic has occurred on the cultural level, as the British researcher Paul Havemann (2016) has written:

> *Economic globalization has also left a legacy of other issues, such as environmental damage, land loss and lack of access to basic services, that have not only resulted in ill health and lower life expectancy but also devastated their complex cultural systems. By 2115, it is estimated that between 50 and 90 per cent of the world's 7,000 mostly indigenous languages will have died out. Many encode unique traditions and environmental knowledge that may disappear with them. The loss of these languages is evidence of a constellation of inter-connected processes of killing and destruction inflicted on indigenous communities for centuries: genocidal violence (killing of peoples), linguicide (death of languages), epistemicide (destruction of knowledge systems), cultural genocide (destruction of cultures) and ecocide (destruction of eco-systems)* (p. 49).

The effects of these elements – intimately interlinked – today represent a threat to all of us, a sort of warning that irreversible, permanent damages will very likely ensue if things do not change. It is impossible to overlook the overexploitation of natural resources in Mexico, the pollution of its forests and waters, not to mention the stubborn, headlong expansion of neoliberal financial capitalism in certain regions.

Then there is the ominous rise in the rates of violence and insecurity that result from the growing, inexorable inequality (minorities everywhere growing richer and richer beside majorities who are falling deeper into poverty). Another aspect of this phenomenon is the siphoning off of prodigious amounts of wealth to offshore tax havens to evade taxes; this happens with extraordinary accumulations of wealth or corporate profits, but also with income of unexplained origin, money in need of laundering because it comes from corruption, bribes, illicit activities of all kinds, including drug trafficking, kidnapping, and extortion, arms trafficking, organ trafficking, human trafficking, the smuggling and sale of archeological artifacts, among other criminal activities.

Political, social, and cultural corruption must also be included in the list of phenomena that have aggravated the general decline in public behavior in multiple settings, identified by some as out-and-out decadence in the ethical and above all cultural domains (Byung-Chul Han, 2013). For this reason, it is urgent to insist that Mexico cannot afford to disregard and squander the enormous reserve of knowledge, techniques, and expertise accumulated over centuries by its native peoples. Their venerable cultural heritage is not of recent vintage; it is the legacy of a unique cosmovision that emerged from the peoples' social interaction, from day-to-day contact with their natural surroundings, and from their profound knowledge of the territory they occupied and transformed over time (Bonfil Batalla, 1989). As Havemann contends, capable environmental management "is not something that needs to be learned from scratch. Indeed, for generations, this knowledge has governed the lives of countless indigenous peoples across the world. While these practices are often seriously threatened, along with the communities themselves, they have much to teach us about how environmental equilibrium can be restored" (Havemann, 2016, p. 49).

This reserve of knowledge that Mexico's original peoples accumulated is invaluable. Its unique status is rooted in the particularly rugged geography that characterizes the country. Havemann observes that "by recognizing indigenous traditional knowledge holders and their rights to self-determination, as well as mainstreaming their wisdom, a new biocultural paradigm could be developed to guide others on how to live within the Earth's ecological limits" (Havemann, 2016, pp. 49-50). For this same reason, the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned years ago:

> *Indigenous peoples are creators, providers and conservers of cultural and biological diversity. On their own, indigenous groups account for most of the world's cultural diversity. Not only is the preservation of human heterogeneity an important factor in and of itself, but indigenous peoples are also directly responsible for some of the most ecologically sustainable activities known around the world. Studies demonstrate that many of the areas of highest biodiversity on earth are inhabited by indigenous peoples. The "Biological 17" – the 17 nations that are home to more than two-thirds of the world's biological resources – are also the traditional territories of most of its indigenous peoples (UNHCHR, no date).9 The interdependence between the extensiveness of plant and animal species and the resource management practices of indigenous peoples demonstrates the indigenous contribution to biodiversity* (2009, p. 23).

Following this line of thinking, it stands to reason that Mexico's indigenous peoples have been providing a vital service to the rest of their fellow citizens all this time by safeguarding the country's biodiversity, especially if the percentages that Havemann reports still apply to Mexico (Havemann, 2016). He points out that:

> *Eighty per cent of the world's biological diversity is found in the 22 per cent of global land area still stewarded by indigenous peoples, with modes of subsistence, consumption and care for nature based on their traditional bodies of knowledge. Furthermore, traditional livelihoods produce 10 per cent of the world's meat and most of the fish that people consume. Small-scale farming based on agro-ecological methods informed by traditional knowledge provides 70 per cent of the world's food needs* (p. 49).

Theoretical Framework

However, in one recent study, Mexican researchers Fabiola López-Barrera, Cristina Martínez-Garza, and Eliane Ceccon (2017) underscore the state of ecological vulnerability in which the country currently finds itself. They remind us that:

> *Mexico encompasses a wide range of environments, which favors a high degree of biological diversity and enormous natural capital. The country is among the top five in the world in terms of biological and cultural diversity. This extraordinary natural capital, however, has suffered alarming degradation due to direct and indirect forces of change, and the interaction among these forces. The main direct forces of change include*

the conversion of natural habitat into other land uses and the resulting fragmentation and deterioration of these habitats; for example, in 1993 only 54% of the country's original natural vegetation cover remained, and by the 2002 this type of vegetation accounted for only 38% of the territory, and about half of it was considered degraded vegetation (2017, p. 98).

This disturbing panorama raises the question of the long-standing relationship that many of Mexico's indigenous peoples have with their natural resources. Why is their relationship so special? The question leads us to reflect and recognize that the gnoseological diversity most likely comes from the relationship between humans and nature in the form of the climatic and morphological diversity of the inhabited territory, as the Brazilian researchers Cristina Yumie, Aoki Inoue, and Paula Franco Moreira argue in an interesting study (2016). This leads us to consider, from the perspective of our Mexican experience, that "the idea of many nature(s) and its implication for the studies of global environmental politics" (Inoue et al., 2016) is undoubtedly plausible because "indigenous knowledge uncovers many ways to consider nature and contributes to recast global environmental studies" (Inoue et al., 2016, p. 1).

We live on one planet but in multiple worlds, or a world of worlds (see Ling, 2014; Onuf, 2013). This interconnection is highlighted by several Mexican scholars in a recent analysis: "the socioecosystem approach recognizes that social systems are integrated with natural systems and seeks to adaptively comanage socioecosystem coevolution for the sustainable development of both systems" (Challenger et al., 2018, pp. 1-2). These answers to the question posed are all the more compelling as far as they coincide with the FAO's observation (2009):

Most indigenous groups demonstrate a socially ingrained capacity for environmental conservation, which is based on their spiritual, cultural, social and economic relationship with land and, more generally, nature. Traditional customs and practices reflect both an attachment to the land and an entrenched sense of responsibility to preserve it for future generations (p. 23).

Can the academic world open itself up to this idea of *many worlds* as a field of research? Along these lines of reflection, Fabiola López-Barrera et al. (2017) provide a useful conceptual underpinning when it states that "restoration ecology is a scientific discipline that uses ecological theory to develop principles that serve to guide the practice of ecosystem restoration" (p. 98).

Restoration ecology is a scientific discipline that uses ecological theory to develop principles that serve to guide restoration practice; ecological restoration has been defined as the process of assisting the recovery of an ecosystem that has been damaged, degraded or destroyed. Bradshaw's conceptualization of restoration ecology opened up a unique opportunity for experimentation to test hypotheses about recovery and resilience processes affecting the structure and function of ecosystems (López Barrera et al., 2017, p. 98).

However, based on this theoretical framework, it is essential not to lose sight that there will be peoples whose knowledge is so inextricably tied up with biodiversity that minimal intervention represents the smartest restoration strategy. We can assume that this approach is solid enough to

encompass a wide range of traditional practices and customs that hard science has trouble comprehending, that simply evade the gaze of Western thinking and systematization, but that undoubtedly point to knowledge of each *world* or natural setting, accumulated by native peoples who have inhabited it for countless generations. It helps to remember that "Western thought is inclined to draw sweeping abstract generalizations that homogenize differences. In indigenous thinking, nuances are fundamental because they underlie heterogeneous complexes that are similar to each other, but never identical. Indigenous thinking presupposes patterns that have a close resemblance, but are ultimately distinguishable" (Arias, 2020, p. 689).

Thus, the objective now will be to examine with rigor and humility the current situation and different facets of restoration ecology in Mexico in a mountainous region of northern Oaxaca that is home to the indigenous Chinanteco people. The program examined sets out to address two fundamental issues: rural poverty and environmental degradation. An impression is that this effort coincides essentially with the holistic approach promoted by the FAO:

> *A realistic understanding of people's strengths and assets is pursued in order to convert these into positive livelihoods outcomes. Furthermore, it emphasizes the relevance of the wider context in which people's livelihoods and capacities are embedded (including institutional environment, policy and legal structures, people's vulnerability context, and so on), in order to link micro and macro dynamics for greater sustainability* (FAO, 2009, p. 47).

Oaxaca and the Chinantla Highlands

Oaxaca is a region of Mexico with remarkable biocultural diversity. Gary J. Martin and several Oaxacan researchers in 2009 surveyed areas conserved by indigenous peoples and communities; the results revealed the existence of 126 community conservation sites in Oaxaca covering at the time 375,457 hectares, 14.5 percent more than the 327,977 hectares included in the Natural Protected Areas decreed by the national government in the state (Martin et al., 2011). The analysis observes:

> *Oaxaca is an impressive but localized phenomenon. There are few regions in the world where communities own and control their resources with the constitutional and legal protection offered by the Mexican state. In addition, Mexican indigenous and mestizo communities have a long history of active resistance or creative accommodation to outside interventions, including neoliberal policies and conservation initiatives. Rarer still, especially outside of Latin America, are places where large areas of forest are the common property of local and indigenous peoples. In recent decades federal decentralization and democratization efforts have strengthened indigenous community self-government in Oaxaca, in contrast to other states in Mexico* (Martin et al., 2011, pp. 261-263).

Aside from these observations about the state of Oaxaca in general, it is important to focus attention on the Chinantla region, particularly the most mountainous part. According to the Mexican researcher Ana Paula de Teresa, this is the best conserved area, even though at the turn of the century it had "the greatest population densities. The areas with the highest levels of erosion,

on the other hand, are located in municipalities with low population densities and predominantly livestock and/or commercial agriculture activities" (De Teresa, 1999, p. 1). It is in these areas where the federal government's programs, such as *Sembrando Vidas,* can have the most promising impact since the land has been seriously degraded by intensive agriculture or livestock grazing.

Within the diverse mosaic of indigenous peoples who live in Oaxaca, the Chinanteco people is the one that has managed to safeguard the most significant internal coherence thanks to "the linguistic and territorial unity that it has maintained as a group from pre-Hispanic times to the present day" (De Teresa, 1999, p. 2). De Teresa gives a descriptive summary of the physical situation of the (High) Chinantla, including its location and overall characteristics:

> *The Chinantla region is representative of the humid tropics. It is located to the northeast of Oaxaca City in the foothills of the Sierra de Juárez. It belongs to the basin of the Papaloapan River and consists of 14 municipalities and 258 localities with a total estimated surface area of 4 596 km². The Chinantecos are the fourth-most populous indigenous group in Oaxaca with 110 223 inhabitants, representing 8.9 per cent of the speakers of an indigenous language in the state and 3.5 per cent of the total population. The complex physiographical and geomorphological conditions of the region give rise to stark changes in altitude and a variety of climates ranging from temperate in the highest reaches of the high Sierra complex to hot subhumid in the southeastern alluvial plains with altitudes below 200 meters above sea level. Along this gradient there are variations that go from 100 to 3 thousand meters over short stretches of 40 kilometers* (1999, p. 2).

This study only looks at the highlands, although the ecological importance of the entire region must not be overlooked, as well as the potential of the natural resources of the "country's third most extensive rainforest" (De Teresa, 1999, p. 3). This researcher from the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana made the following observation about the lands in question:

> *Forestry is practiced primarily in the Chinantla highlands, which comprise the municipalities of Yolox, Comaltepec y Quiotepec (…) 39 per cent of its area is covered with high evergreen forests; it also has highly biodiverse plant communities such as mountainous cloud forest (7.65 per cent of the surface area), pine-oak forest (6.39 per cent), laurel forest, and some very rare communities such as the so-called elfin forest or stunted forest, forming one of the country's largest drainage basins* (De Teresa, 1999, p. 3).

Unlike the lowlands and the flat areas of the midland municipalities connected to the commercial centers in Tuxtepec, Alvarado, and Veracruz, the highlands are challenging to reach and very wet. As Professor Marcos Núñez of the Universidad del Papaloapan points out, "in the Chinantla region water is more than just an economic resource; it is a fundamental element for understanding how the Chinanteco population sees itself in the world and in history" (2019, p. 140). Rivers, springs, and lakes are part of their cosmovision and their conception of nature as something inhabited by sacred, supernatural beings since pre-Hispanic times (*Apud*. Núñez, 2019).

It would seem that their belief system in the final analysis served as a discursive tool to preserve resources. In the narrative today, and in the statements made by the informants, its presence has dwindled due to the accelerated changes imposed by the governments of Mexico since the mid-20th century. Nevertheless, other important supernatural beings persist in the narrative production—they might have had the function of being the owners of the past. I am referring to the giant fish, the mermaids and others that could not be included in this paper due to its brevity or to the need to study them in future papers, such as the Llorona, the Matlacihua, the chaneques and the nahuales (Núñez, 2019, p. 140).
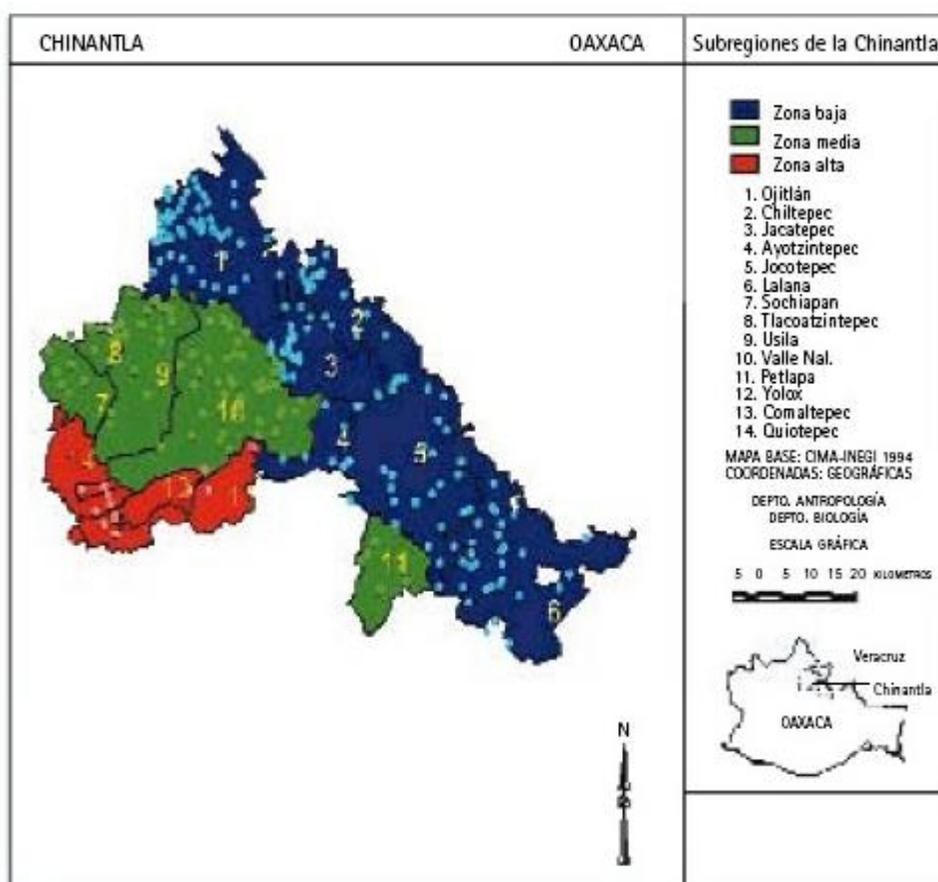
Note: Due to its ecogeographic conditions, the Chinantla region can be divided into three subregions: lowlands, midlands, and highlands. The first is located in the Papaloapan basin at less than 400 meters above sea level, and comprises the municipalities of San Luis Ojitlán, San José Chiltepec, Santa María Jacatepec, Ayotzintepec, San Juan Lalana and Santiago Jocotepec. The midlands (located between 400 and 1000 meters above sea level) include the municipalities of San Juan Bautista Valle Nacional, San Felipe Usila, San Juan Bautista Tlacoatzintepec, San Pedro Sochiapam and San Juan Petlapa. Finally, the municipalities of San Pedro Yolox, Santiago Comaltepec, and San Juan Quiotepec make up the highlands. This area is located in the Sierra de Juárez at elevations higher than 1000 meters above sea level (De Teresa, 1999).

De Teresa (1999) asserts that for this reason,

> *Since colonial times and up to the present day, the municipalities in the highlands have kept themselves relatively isolated from Oaxaca's economic development, as their abrupt topography, together with the dense vegetation and the torrential rains, have succeeded in blocking the expansion of agroforestry and livestock initiatives in the area. This group of municipalities is known for engaging primarily in subsistence agriculture; they grow the traditional crops: maize, beans, yuca and squash* (p. 4-6).

Of course, this independence resulted from a long struggle that the Chinantecos waged. They organized before the neoliberal period to keep their resources from falling into state-supported concessionaires' hands and block private entities from exploiting their forests in the second half of the past century. As the Mexican researcher Ricardo Mondragón (n. d.) explains,

> *The communities of the Natural Resource Committee of the Chinantla Highlands (CORENCHI, in its initials in Spanish) are located in the foothills of the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca, Mexico, in the sub-basins of the Usila and Valle Nacional Rivers, which belong to the larger basin of the Papaloapan River. Actions were taken over 15 years ago to protect the mountain cloud forest vegetation and the high evergreen forests by way of a series of territorial management instruments aimed at the conservation and sustainable use of natural resources* (p. 1).

Fortunately, in 2018, as part of Mexico's environmental policy, the Mexican federal government proposed a significant shift in approach, implementing an ambitious restoration program called *Sembrando Vida (Planting Life)* in several states around the country. The program aims to rescue degraded ecosystems (such as the Chinantla lowlands, which are not included in this study), thereby reactivating the local economy; regenerating the social fabric of indigenous communities; and turning small landholders, *ejidos* (communities that hold their land in common) and other communities into a strategic sector with a focus on sustainability and short, medium and long-term regional development. *Sembrando Vida* seeks to cut out the middlemen and encourage "the agrarian subjects to establish productive agroforestry systems, combining traditional crops with fruit and timber-yielding trees, in a system known as Cornfields Interspersed Among Fruit Trees" (Aldrete Terrazas, 2019).

It would be presumptuous to pass any judgment on such a massive, complex undertaking (see the Report by Helena Cotler, Robert Manson, and Joaquín Daniel Nava Martínez, 2020). I agree with the Mexican scholars Moisés Mendez-Toribio, Cristina Martínez-Garza, and Eliane Ceccon (2021), who argue that the results of restoration projects on this scale are difficult for both project leaders and stakeholders to assess, primarily because so little time has passed. Long-term assessments, however, will eventually be forthcoming because "this information is fundamental for expanding ecological restoration actions" (Méndez-Toribio et al., 2021, p. 1).

Hopefully, *Sembrando Vida* will prove to be flexible and successful enough in its implementation to be applied in many other deforested and unproductive lands around the country, with continued and resounding success. Perhaps, the will for genuine transformation will help solve many conflicts undermining the effectiveness of development policies due to unilateral

implementation, i.e., behind the backs of the peoples involved. It is vital to bear in mind that in response to the environmental crisis, Mexico's neoliberal regimes signed a series of International Conventions with very ambitious goals; it will be a real challenge to comply with many of them, as López-Barrera et al. (2017) point out in their analysis:

> *As a signatory of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), [Mexico] since 1993 has been committed to restoring all its top-priority ecosystems by 2020 (AICHI goal 14) along with 15% of its degraded ecosystems. Furthermore, the Mexican Strategy for the Conservation of Plant Diversity calls for restoring 50% of degraded ecosystems by 2030. Recently, in Lima, Peru (COP20-2014), Mexico undertook the commitment to start restoring 8.5 million hectares of its territory by 2020 as part of the 20 x 20 initiative for Latin America* (pp. 105-106).

Conclusion

The overview presented in this study has generated several significant insights. For one thing, it is possible to objectively quantify and interrelate the scales of an undeniably complex problem, namely, the struggle of indigenous peoples to safeguard their historical and cultural uniqueness over time. This brief study has enabled the linkage of the international, national, and local levels.

This challenge allowed an appreciation of the critical situation that indigenous peoples around the world have endured after centuries of exploitation and domination, then to link it to the particular conditions in Mexico and the more specific case of community conservation and restoration processes, such as in the southern portion of the Chinantla region in Oaxaca. In this way, the main ideas and processes in the struggle waged by the world's indigenous people, including Mexico's, over the last 50 or 60 years were synthesized. These processes succeeded in radically changing the main multilateral legislative instruments of international forums and partially modifying Mexico's constitutional framework and other legal provisions to benefit its original peoples.

These are peoples, after all, who account for approximately 350 million of the world's inhabitants (15 million in Mexico), and who take on outsized importance for humanity's future, inasmuch as it is quite likely that some of them, with the deep connections they have with their cosmogony and nature, will be able to offer answers to two questions that will be crucial in the upcoming centuries to recover the self-sufficiency in food production that Mexico once had and simultaneously ensuring the conservation and restoration of the country's natural resources on behalf of future generations.

The case study of an area as remote as the Chinantla Highlands of Oaxaca, Mexico, shows the solidity of the Zapotec people's knowledge, know-how, and age-old experiences who inhabit the region; this must not be overlooked. Without implementing innovative restoration strategies in their habitat, this small population has managed to preserve the greatest biodiversity of their *world*, not to mention their unique cultural heritage.

Along these lines, it is reasonable to presume that other aboriginal peoples around the world (and not just the native peoples of Mesoamerica) share certain enduring elements analogous to those examined here, such as a religious connection to the Earth, its natural elements, and the ways of interacting with its laws. There is no diverging from this worldview, no degeneration, no contradictions on the practical level. The relations, explanations, and balance that are cultivated

always align with the possibilities offered by the surroundings and with the possibilities of long-term survival. Obviously, there is no pollution, no physical or moral contamination.

Is it feasible to tap into the knowledge and historical memory of the sixty-eight original peoples and communities that live in our national territory or other original peoples living in different countries worldwide? We believe that it is. The experiences of the Chinantla region lead us to believe so, provided we are willing as academics to learn and value the humanistic and cultural differences that characterize these peoples in gnoseological terms.

For example, in a recent study, the UNAM researcher Patrick Johansson Keraudren (2019) shows that from time immemorial, the indigenous epistemes of Mexico's original peoples have not aligned with those of imaginary or modern Mexico. Their perception of space-time is not linear or expansive. This form of discernment opens up the possibility of connecting the past, the present, and the future through cycles, myths, and oral traditions. This points to a divergent way of perceiving that does not correspond to the Western idea of scientific transcendence, i.e., the separation of fact from the object being studied.

In the indigenous world, imminence is paramount, being is tied up with its essence (not separate from it); it forms part of the world of plants and animals. There is no primary disassociation between subject and object. The idea of truth makes reference to a natural root (merging of root and truth). Thus, indigenous thinking does not favor abstraction or the conceptual gymnastics that many intellectuals cannot live without. The heart also functions as an idea processor because there is a dialogue between intellect/reason and sensitivity. For this reason, written expression is not enough to encompass autochthonous knowledge. The auditory and tactile dimensions are still primordial, along with alternative language and lived experience in conveying knowledge.

For this reason, it is up to modern society to find ways to approach the indigenous peoples, to engage in dialogue with them, to learn from them. Today, the solutions that many of these peoples and communities apply to everyday human problems show distinct advantages over the modern world's in multiple spheres (political, economic, social, psychosocial, moral, etc.). We are dealing, of course, with very different frameworks for approaching reality, social interaction, the transmission of information, and the preservation of the species and natural resources. Drawing on these sources for a world as complex and disoriented as the Western world calls for genuine recognition and a highly developed capacity for assimilation and individual and collective transformation.

In short, the journey undertaken in this emblematic study leads to the corollary that the nature of today's autochthonous peoples cannot be separated from nature itself and that there is perhaps no opposition between the distant past of a civilization such as Mesoamerica's; its present overlooked out of ignorance and rejection; and the future that would seem to expand to encompass a particularly hopeful reencounter with oneself. As Fernando Mondragón (n. d.) observes,

> *The example of the communities of the Natural Resource Committee of the Chinantla Highlands is based on the active participation of their members, and forms part of a process of strengthening local instruments to ensure development that grows out of the perspective of the community itself, the generation of a grass-roots organization, the regional vision of natural resource conservation, the responsible management of payment for environmental services— in this case, the formation of the socio-environmental fund. It is important to understand that one reality of Oaxaca and Latin America is the fact that well-conserved forests and*

jungles are to be found primarily in areas with a rural, indigenous population. Thus, environmental services should be seen as a result of the process of strengthening local capacities for organization, administration, the promotion of production and self-sufficiency, and natural and cultural resource conservation, all within a framework of respect for the rights of the peoples and communities inhabiting the territories (p. 11).

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