

GOING NATIVE: THE ANTHROPOLOGIST AS ADVOCATE

by Robert M. Laughlin



In 1989 after studying the Tzotzil Maya culture of Chiapas, Mexico for almost thirty years, I decided to become an advocacy anthropologist and helped create the Tzotzil-Tzeltal cultural cooperative Sna Jtz'ibajom, The House of the Writer, in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas.

The House of the Writer cooperative has published many bilingual books, hosted national and international conferences, and provides courses in native literacy. Its Teatro Lo'il Maxil, Monkey Business Theatre, is world-renowned. I have translated into English a dozen of their plays, written in Spanish, which revive ancient beliefs and confront current social, economic, and political issues (Laughlin, 2008). These plays were not purely Tzotzil-Tzeltal because often I participated in crafting their texts and settings (see website listed on page 9).

The House of the Writer was and is a unique organization for the State of Chiapas and perhaps for all of Mexico in that it was founded, administered, and staffed by Indians. One ladino (mestizo) member of the group aided (and still aids) in organizing trips, contacting government institutions for financial aid, and helping in various ways to carry out the group's mission. In recognition of my role in helping to found the cooperative, I was awarded

the State of Chiapas Science Prize in 2002.

I first came to Chiapas as a member of Evon Z. Vogt's Harvard Chiapas Project. All project members were required to learn the Mayan language spoken in the town under investigation. In my case it was the Tzotzil language with the dialect used in the town of San Lorenzo Zinacantán.

I resolved to immerse myself in Zinacantán's culture, adopting their clothing and following, as best I could, their way of life. This was a great challenge, for at that time the importance of virtually any dialogue was strictly measured by the quantity and quality, i.e. strength, of the *pax* or cane liquor that was offered and shared by two people. Many a night of fieldwork ended with me in an inebriated state!

My original focus was on folk tales (Laughlin 1977) and dreams (Laughlin 1976). I made a large collection of each in Tzotzil, along with my English translations. The next task – compiling a dictionary of the language spoken in Zinacantán – took 14 years as it was done before computers were used for this type of work. This dictionary, *The Great Tzotzil Dictionary of San Lorenzo Zinacantán*, when published in 1975, received Senator William Proxmire's



Jaguar addresses toad.

Golden Fleece Award for “absurd waste of federal funds.” It was at the time the most comprehensive dictionary that existed of a Native American language. It was also through this work that I came to know the deeply paternalistic Tzotzil and Tzeltal cultures.

Because of the paternalistic nature of the Tzotzil culture, even in the 1990s it was revolutionary for women to be accorded equal status in the cooperative and theater that I helped the people develop. The cooperative, in fact, made sure early on that there was an equal number of female and male members. In the beginning, the women found it difficult to express their views in the cooperative meetings. When the women first performed in San Cristóbal de las Casas, they overheard male audience members accusing them of being prostitutes or lesbians. The men in the House of the Writer responded by electing a woman to be the group’s president, not just once but several times for several years.

Two of the female members of the cooperative, feeling that their voices were not heard by the men, resigned to form a new women’s cooperative, FOMMA (Fortaleza de la Mujer Maya or Strength of Mayan Women). Their theatre focuses on women’s issues, such as domestic abuse and economic disadvantages. They also provide native literacy courses, and, in addition, workshops in health education and job skills training such as breadmaking.

The theatre, which has performed in every corner of Chiapas, in Guatemala and Honduras, particularly appeals to the corn farmers in these countries. Especially popular is the play “When corn began to grow.” The performance shows how the gods, irritated by the way men ignored them and failed to give them offerings, decided to give them the job of raising corn for a living, a job that required heavy labor and constant attention through most of the year.

While this theatre’s most frequent audience is composed of fellow Indians, Mexican and foreign tourists are welcomed and offered an intimate view of the native culture.

A significant element of Tzotzil culture is the people’s deep knowledge of ethnobotany. It was not unusual for a native person to recognize and know the Tzotzil names for 500 plants. Accordingly, I enlisted Dennis E. Breedlove to make the scientific identifications. Our ethnobotany (Laughlin, Breedlove, 1993) has been described as the most comprehensive for any native culture.

Currently I am finalizing my translation of 42 folk tales that I recorded in 2007 in the colony of San Felipe in San Cristóbal. The storyteller, Francisca Hernández Hernández, is a grand-daughter of a Chamulan shaman and a Zinacantec lady. Many of her tales are, for me, new

versions of tales I earlier recorded in Zinacantán, while others are particular to San Felipe.

Hence I have come full circle, still working with folktales as I did in my early days as an anthropologist, but also working in collaboration with the Maya who have enriched my life in so many ways. I have tried to give back to this extraordinary culture by working with its people to help them support and transmit their traditions and language, while they also adapt to modern life. Anthropology has changed in many ways since I first entered the field in the 1960s. Perhaps my work as an advocacy anthropologist not only reflects the growing acceptance of such work within the discipline, but may even push the discipline to further change in these new directions.

Further References

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Website: *Unmasking the Maya: The Story of Sna Jtz'ibajom* (<http://anthropology.si.edu/maya/>)

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