Indigenous Languages, Gender and Community Organisation in the Era of Globalization

The Case of the Mazatec Women of the Naxi-í in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Introduction¹

It is estimated that more than half of the languages spoken on the planet will disappear in the course of this century. This phenomenon is attributed, among other factors, to broad trends towards linguistic and cultural homogenisation that are promoted by the neoliberal model of globalisation.² The authors of this article wonder if other forms of experiencing globalisation exist which might provide ways to change the multi-faceted marginalization experienced by minority sociolinguistic groups. We explore this question by examining the experience of an organisation of Mazatec women in Oaxaca, Mexico, who have managed to reinforce their ethnic and linguistic identity while working to develop more just gender relations.

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- ¹ We thank the scientific and financial support provided by the IUF Mesoamerican Morphophonology project (MAMP) to carry out the field research, and also to the Axe 7 EM2 project at Labex EFL (Paris 3 and 7) for analyzing the data. Information on this project can be found at “EM2 Cross-mediated endangered language elicitation.” <<http://axe7.labex-efl.org/em2-description>>, visited on 14 November 2013.
 - ² Neoliberal ideology promotes the shrinking of the state and the promotion of free markets. It implies the implementation of reforms that make citizens responsible for services that were previously provided by the state. These reforms have had specific effects on indigenous peoples, who now receive even less support than before, and who have increasingly been made responsible for their own well-being. They have become responsible for marketing their own produce for instance, even though historical conditions have left them in a weak position to compete in the market. In Mexico public spending was dramatically reduced through structural adjustment policies imposed by the International Monetary Fund in the 1980s and through measures adopted by the government of Carlos Salinas de Gortari (1988–1994). Social spending was reduced and measures were taken to privatize elements of the education and health systems. The process of agricultural reform was stopped, as were subsidies to the agricultural sector, leading to a situation in which many indigenous peasant farmers could no longer survive in the countryside. See Maylei Blackwell et al., “Cruce de Fronteras, Identidades Indígenas, Género y Justicia en Las Américas,” in *Desacatos* 31 (2009): 13–39.

The group we refer to is the *Naxi-í* Organisation of United Women, which has more than a decade of experience of organising Mazatec women and of developing productive activities that contribute to family incomes. The use of the Mazatec language has played a fundamental role in this process. In the following pages we reflect on the relation between this organisational process and the reactivation of the language.

Naxi-í is based in the village of San Jeronimo Tecoaatl in the Sierra Mazateca region of Oaxaca State in Mexico. It has 1,606 inhabitants, according to official statistics.³ The large part of its inhabitants speaks the indigenous Mazatec language. Nonetheless, the displacement of Mazatec by the only official language of the country – Spanish – is linked to a process of historic linguistic and cultural imperialism which began with the Spanish Conquest.

Experts point out that a high proportion of languages spoken on the planet are disappearing. According to Krauss half of these will vanish during the course of this century.⁴ Language extinction represents the loss of a huge range of ancestral knowledge relating to ecological environments, systems of medicine and religions as well as other cultural aspects of the speakers.⁵

In Mexico, the diversity of indigenous cultures and languages (it is estimated that there are around 400 linguistic groups) is also threatened with extinction. This is a result of the monocultural national project, which legitimated the imposition of Castilian Spanish through policies which promote a subtractive bilingualism.⁶ Language Policies imposed by governing elites have varied over time. In general terms, during the colonial period segregationist policies tolerated the use of indigenous languages, in order to enable the transmission of Castilian Spanish, to gain control of local resources and to accommodate the indigenous population to the new dominant culture. During the 19th century the integrationist policies of an independent Mexico were

3 Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, *México en Cifras* (Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, 2013): <<http://www.inegi.org.mx/default.aspx>>, visited on 7 June 2013.

4 Michael Krauss, "The World's Languages in Crisis," in *Languages* 68 (1), (1992), 4–10.

5 Tove Skutnabb-Kangas et al., *Sharing a World of Differences: The Earth's Linguistic, Cultural and Biological Diversity* (UNESCO, París, 2003).

6 Karla Janiré Avilés González, "Aquí ya no hablan mexicano... ¡les da pena! Estigmas nahuas en Santa Catarina, Tepoztlán, Morelos," in *Entre el Estigma y la Resistencia: Dinámicas Étnicas en Tiempos de Globalización*, edited by Karla Janiré Avilés González and Adriana Terven (Mexico, CIESAS, 2011); Rebecca Barriga Villanueva and Pedro Martín Butrageño, *Historia Sociolingüística de México* (Mexico, El Colegio de México, 2011); Jean-Léo Léonard et al., "Multilingual Policies Put into Practice: Coparticipative Educational Workshops in Mexico," in *Current Issues in Language Planning*, 14 (3–4), (2013), 410–435.

characterised by a rejection of multilingualism in the political sphere, instead maintaining Spanish as the only official language. In the face of the failure of previous policies to hispanicize the population, the move towards corporatism in the 20th century was accompanied by the recognition of certain indigenous values and practices and the institutionalisation of bilingual education. This was undertaken partly as a move to gain the support of the indigenous population, but above all in order to continue the process of biological, linguistic and cultural intermingling of indigenous and mestizo populations. While the Mexican state currently has a policy of multiculturalism, underpinned by the constitutional recognition of the linguistic rights of indigenous peoples, at national level Spanish continues to be the only official language of the country. Furthermore, in practice, official bilingual education continues to privilege the learning of Spanish.⁷

Another factor that has contributed to the loss of indigenous languages has been the need of the indigenous population to enter the labour market. This is a result, among other things, of the crisis of the rural economy.⁸ This has led to a situation in which speakers of indigenous languages represent only six per cent of the total population of the country (estimated at 101 million inhabitants, according to data from the last Census of Population and Housing carried out in 2010 by INEGI).⁹ The linguistic group that is the subject of our study – Mazatec – accounts for roughly 200,000 speakers, located principally in the state of Oaxaca. Although *Ethnologue: Languages of the World* classifies the Mazatec spoken in San Jeronimo Tecoaatl as ‘vigorous’,¹⁰ ethnographic research indicates a growing breakdown in linguistic transmission between generations, leading to the learning of Spanish being privileged at home as much as at school. These issues lead us to investigate the importance of Mazatec among

7 Avilés González, “Aquí ya no hablan mexicano...”

8 Ángela Ixkic Bastian Duarte, *Desde el Sur Organizado. Mujeres Nahuas del Sur de Veracruz. Construyendo Política* (Mexico: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana-Xochimilco, 2011).

9 “Hablantes de Lengua Indígena en México,” *Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía*. <<http://cuentame.inegi.org.mx/poblacion/lindigena.aspx?tema=P>>, visited on 14 November 2013.

10 A recognized and prestigious catalogue of world languages. Paul M. Lewis, Gary F. Simons, and Charles D. Fennig (eds.), *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, Seventeenth Edition*. Dallas, Texas: SIL International, 2013. <<http://www.ethnologue.com>>, visited June 7 2013. According to this source there are 20,000 speakers of Mazatec in the region, accounting for 10% of all speakers of the language. This figure includes speakers in the municipality of San Jeronimo Tecoaatl as well as other localities where other versions of Mazatec are spoken.

its speakers, in particular in the activities coordinated by the *Naxi-í* Organisation of United Women.

The reflections set out in this article are based on field work carried out in San Jeronimo Tecoahtl during the summer of 2012. This included semi-structured interviews,¹¹ recording of life histories, and carrying out workshops and ethnographic observation in order to assess the use of Mazatec in different contexts. These activities served not only as tools for the collection of data but also to make a contribution to supporting the preservation of local languages and culture, and to promoting the empowerment of speakers through the mutual transfer of knowledge. We consider this “empowerment” to be co-participative,¹² on the basis that each one of the participants is recognised to have differing but complementary knowledge and experience.

This article is divided into four sections. The first of these is this introduction; the second discusses the link between the recovery of Mazatec as promoted by members of the *Naxi-í* and the broadening of spaces for participation by women. The third section discusses the idea that growing links between actors in different parts of the world (as occurs in the context of globalisation) have stimulated new, culturally differentiated understandings of the participation of women in communal decision-making. In conclusion, the final reflections section develops the idea that the process of organising women can renew indigenous languages but also political and ethnic identities, and in this way generate creative forms of social participation. This suggests that globalisation is not a one-way process, and that it can also provide opportunities for minority sociolinguistic groups to overcome aspects of their marginalisation, at least to a certain extent.

Gender Equity from a Mazatec Perspective

When speaking of problems linked to gender relations, indigenous women frequently refer to domestic violence or other kinds of tensions within the family.

- 11 The “Languages and You” questionnaire, developed by Jean-Léo Léonard and Liliane Jagueneau (Sorbonne Nouvelle University – Paris 3, and University of Poitiers, France) was used. It was translated and adapted for the Mexican context by Karla Janiré Avilés González.
- 12 On the notion of empowerment in gender studies and in sociolinguistics, see, respectively, Esther Batiri Williams, “Why So Silent? Empowering Women in a Wired World” (paper presented at the 7th International Interdisciplinary Congress on Women, Tromsø, Norway, June 20–26 1999), and John Edwards, “Players and Power in Minority-group Settings,” in *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 27:1 (2006), 4–21.

They mention women who have difficulties obtaining permission from their husbands or fathers to leave the house, or of girls who don't have the same opportunities to attend school as their brothers. Many refer to customs or traditions that provide support for these practices, but which are now changing in the face of women's opposition.¹³

Although such practices also occur in non-indigenous societies, their existence has been used as an argument to describe indigenous societies as primitive or backward, and to suggest that these women need to be *protected* from their own cultures. Some liberal feminist theorists and academics, such as Susan Moller Okin have helped to strengthen the stereotype of indigenous women as victims of their own traditions.¹⁴ This claim is made on the assumption that the cultural reproduction of indigenous groups requires the perpetuation of practices that limit women's individual freedoms, subordinating them to collective structures. Indigenous women would therefore be freer to the extent that they *integrated* themselves into national Western societies. Post-colonial feminists such as Chandra Mohanty,¹⁵ or Lata Mani,¹⁶ feminists who recognise the importance of difference such as Iris Marion Young,¹⁷ and

- 13 Various studies have investigated this issue. These include a study by Sandra Cañas on Tsotsil women in Chiapas who have converted to Islam (Sandra Cañas, "Islam y Relaciones de Género en San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapas," in Avilés González and Terven *Entre el Estigma y la Resistencia*); a study by Ixkic Bastian with an organisationorganisation of Nahua women in the south of Veracruz state (Bastian, *Desde el Sur Organizado*), and one by Adriana Terven also on the organisationorganisation of Nahua women in the Sierra Norte of Puebla state (A. Terven, "Revitalización de la Costumbre Jurídica en el Juzgado Indígena de Cuetzalan. Retos Desde el Estado," in Avilés González and Terven *Entre el Estigma y la Resistencia*).
- 14 Susan Moller Okin, "Liberalismo Político, Justicia y Género" in Carmen Castell (ed), *Perspectivas Feministas en Teoría Política*, (Barcelona, Paidós, 1996) and "Is Multiculturalismo Bad for Women?," in Susan Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalismo Bad for Women?* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 15 Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in Chandra T. Mohanty et al., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1986). Chandra T. Mohanty, "Encuentros Feministas: Situar la Política de la Experiencia," in Michèle Barrett and Anne Phillips *Desestabilizar la Teoría. Debates feministas contemporáneos*, (Mexico, PUEG/UNAM, 2002). Chandra T. Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes Revisited: Feminist Solidarity Through Anticapitalist Struggles," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 28:2, 2002.
- 16 Lata Mani, "Tradiciones en Discordia: el Debate sobre la Sati en la India Colonial," in S. Dube, *Pasados Poscoloniales*, (Mexico, El Colegio de México, 1999).
- 17 Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1990).

indigenous feminists as Alma López Mejía,¹⁸ and Martha Sánchez Nestor,¹⁹ respond to this issue by arguing that while it is important not to deny the subordination of women in different cultural contexts, it is also important to avoid portraying them simply as victims of patriarchy.

The lack of recognition of certain women's rights is neither a constitutive nor static cultural trait, because cultural practices are themselves the result of the interaction of economic, geographic, social, political and ecological factors, and are influenced by the dynamic character of each of these factors. In questioning practices that bind them, indigenous women transform their own culture. This process reinforces the importance of framing the questions we ask about their experiences within the context of their own particular histories and trajectories. As we will see, the women of the *Naxi-í* assert the importance of their own culture, while at the same time subjecting it to criticism, in recognition of the fact that traditional gender norms can restrict their own development. In this context, one hears frequently that the experience of organising has transformed their lives and allowed them to change family relationships.

Testimonies illustrate that before the organisation existed, *Mazatec women* of San Jerónimo were not *accustomed* to leaving the house to meet and take part in collective activities. The desire of some women to participate more actively in the political and economic life of the community led them to accept the invitation of the then municipal president to establish an organisation of Mazatec women. In this way the *Naxi-í* was born in 1999. The first women who worked to establish the organisation came up against the opposition of other women as much as that of men, and found many doors were closed against them. As illustrated in the following testimony, this opposition was strongly linked to predominant local conceptions of gender relations, in which women are meant to carry out domestic tasks and to look after their families, rather than to participate in formal politics.

Mariela,²⁰ 56 years old and one of the most active members of *Naxi-í*, talks about the origin of the association: "The organisation was founded in 1999 with the aim that we women could participate more actively within our

18 Ángela Ixkic Duarte Bastian, "Conversación con Alma López, Autoridad Guatemalteca. La Doble Mirada del Género y la Etnicidad," in *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 18, 2002.

19 Martha Sánchez Néstor, "Ser Mujer Indígena en México: una Experiencia Personal y Colectiva en el Movimiento Indígena en la Última Década," in Martha Sánchez Néstor (ed.) *La Doble Mirada. Voces e Historias de las Mujeres Indígenas Latinoamericanas* (Mexico, Unifem/ILSB, (2005).

20 All interviews were carried out in September 2012 in San Jerónimo Tecoatl, Oaxaca, by Karla Janiré Avilés González. For reasons of confidentiality participants' names have been changed. Some interviews were carried out in Spanish, others in Mazatec, depending on

community. According to our traditions, there is very little participation by women in nearly all Mazatec communities. [But] we used to ask ourselves why women shouldn't be involved in community activities. At community level it's always been men who made the decisions. They still do so now, though it's not like it used to be."

Mariela recalls that in that era it was very unusual for women to take part in the political life of the community. In communal assemblies for example "the person who had to attend was the man, because he was the one who was meant to make decisions on behalf of the women." Efforts by the women to organise themselves took place at the same time as government initiatives at municipal and state level to increase the number of women participating in formal political processes. Although this helped them, the women nonetheless had to struggle for every gain they have made. At times these were silent battles which took the form of "everyday resistance," rather than open rebellion.²¹ For example, to take part in the assembly they concealed themselves among a group of men from outside the village and hidden in this way made their way to the meeting place. As we shall see shortly, the use of Mazatec in everyday settings and above all in this political space is also an element of these 'silent battles'. We will also see that the local language has played and continues to play an essential role in sustaining the activities of the *Naxi-í*.

At the beginning, 27 women began to organize. This number has grown even if the total number fluctuates over time. At first productive activities were destined for household consumption; later on production for sale to the market was undertaken. Activities have included cultivation of organic vegetables, preparation of fruit and vegetable conserves, as well as the keeping of domestic fowl.

The organisation's work has also helped to bring important technological advances within reach of the community. For example, an internet café was established, providing a means of accessing advanced technologies in an autonomous manner, enabling communication via the internet, and also contributing to the association's income, through renting out internet access. In effect, this "globalized" form of communication has helped the association achieve its goals, by enabling links to be established more easily with groups outside the community, with state or national associations, and with researchers and universities at an international level. Indeed, the contacts established between members of the MAMp project and the women of the *Naxi-í* were

the linguistic abilities of the interviewees. Women from the community helped with the translations. This particular interview was carried out in Spanish.

21 James Scott, *Los Dominados y el Arte de la Resistencia* (Mexico, Era, 2000).

initiated and maintained via the internet, which proved to be a highly effective medium of communication.

Workspaces have also been created in which various productive activities such as the manufacture of preserves can be carried out, and in which meetings and workshops are held. Interactions with counterparts elsewhere in the world are clearly present in all these activities. The women of the *Naxi-í* have actively sought out these external connections, whether at national or international level, which in turn have contributed to their own learning process. For example, the most recent workspace was built with the help of a group of German students, who combined the use of local materials with the latest architectural techniques, thereby creating a space for the *Naxi-í*'s productive and organisational work.

Such encounters are characterised by multilingualism: German, Mazatec and Spanish are used in the same space, with the latter language serving as a lingua franca between Germans and Mazatecs. Nevertheless, the women hold their discussions in Mazatec and make decisions which are then disseminated in Spanish. These experiences illustrate that even when international contacts are taken into account, Mazatec does not play a secondary role, but is in fact central to the organisational life of the women of the *Naxi-í*.

In addition, *Naxi-í* members have documented part of the culinary tradition of San Jeronimo Tecoaatl in a recipe book "Forgotten Flavours," which both men and women from the community contributed to. This book of traditional recipes was originally written in Spanish. However, its authors intend to translate it into Mazatec in the near future. This project was undertaken with the support of other organisations, including in particular that of the Centre for Support of the Oaxacan Popular Movement (CAMPO). The relationship with this non-governmental organisation (NGO) was also central in the decision by the *Naxi-í* to work to involve women in all activities figuring in the municipal development plan. All of the projects comprise elements of the activities undertaken by the *Naxi-í* to revitalize Mazatec traditions by involving members of the community.

In spite of the obstacles described above, the Mazatec women of San Jeronimo have achieved important advances in the field of gender relations. This is the fruit of the persistence of the women of the *Naxi-í* to defend their rights: one of the most important achievements is their right to speak and vote in communal assemblies.²² Even though the exercise of 'linguistic

22 Iniciativas para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Oaxaqueña A.C and Naxi-í, *Manual para Fomentar la Participación Política y Electoral de las Mujeres Indígenas en Oaxaca*. (Oaxaca, Mexico Iniciativas para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Oaxaqueña A.C and Naxi-í, 2009).

rights'²³ does not figure among the explicit demands of the *Naxi-í*, the use of Mazatec in oral terms has emerged as a strategy of resistance and even of ethno-linguistic re-conquest.²⁴ The women's stories reveal that the gains mentioned have been achieved, either directly or indirectly, through the use of Mazatec. For instance, it was through this language that they developed their ability to articulate their cause. The ways in which the language is used differs according to communicative competence of speakers. This includes monolingual speakers and different degrees of bilingualism.²⁵ Mazatec is the language of monolingual Mazatec members of the *Naxi-í*, whether young or old. As such, it is in fact *the* medium for the empowerment of Mazatec women. The case of Mariela is paradigmatic in illustrating the acquisition of communicative competence in Mazatec. Mariela had stopped using her native language after living for nine years in Mexico City. However, her involvement in the public life of the community, undertaken at first through a group of housewives, and subsequently with the *Naxi-í*, led her to take up her the mazatec language again. In her own words: "people often used to ask me to pause (in my community work) because I couldn't speak Mazatec very well." From then on, Mariela told herself, "if all the other women speak Mazatec, I have to be able to speak it well!" She then worked hard to increase her fluency. This improved her ability to bring groups together and to work with them, and to be heard not only by Spanish speakers but also by monolingual Mazatec women. This illustrates that bilingualism has been an important tool for the work of the *Naxi-í* and that it has not hindered the revitalization of Mazatec. In fact, we can describe it as an *additive bilingualism*, rather than a *subtractive* one, because it actually enables and promotes the use of the indigenous language.²⁶ This is remarkable, given that the trend at national level is towards subtractive bilingualism, in other words, promoting the use of Spanish in place of native languages. (Schooling in San Jeronimo, for example, is undertaken exclusively in Spanish).

The Mazatec language proved to be a force that helped to push forward and give cohesion to the political organisation of women. Since the establishment

23 See "Ley General de Derechos Lingüísticos de los Pueblos Indígenas," Federal Chamber of Deputies. <<http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/doc/257.doc>>, visited on 14 November 2013.

24 For a more detailed discussion of linguistic policies in Mexico, and in particular the speaking and writing of different variants of Mazatec, see Jean-Léo Léonard et al., "Multilingual Policies Put into Practice."

25 José Antonio Flores Farfán. *Cuaterros somos y toind idioma hablamos* (CIESAS, Mexico, 1999).

26 Joshua Fishman, *Reversing Language Shift* (Philadelphia, Multilingual Matters, 1991).

of the association, monolingual Mazatec women have participated in activities such as the production of preserves or in the workshops held by external actors. During a workshop on the geo-linguistics of Mazatec held in September 2012,²⁷ we observed the importance of the language in the way that its use empowered these women. Without Mazatec, the work of Mariela and the other members of the organisation would not have had the same depth. In fact it allowed them to reach all aspects of everyday life in San Jeronimo Tecoaatl. For instance, it helped them to negotiate the “permission” of their husbands so that they could continue taking part in the political and productive activities of the *Naxi-í* (see below).

Fernanda, a thirty year old monolingual Mazatec woman and a member of the *Naxi-í* since its foundation, mentions that the use of the indigenous language within the organization has been central in ensuring her involvement. She explains that she likes to be part of the organisation because she feels included and learns new skills, such as how to manufacture preserves or to take part in projects. These new abilities are translated and transmitted through Mazatec, even though, like other indigenous Mexican languages, it has been considered as linked to the past and to immovable tradition. The practice of the *Naxi-í* therefore calls into question the false dichotomy between tradition and modernity, in which many interpretations of indigenous life are caught up.

Nonetheless, the achievements of the *Naxi-í* need to be placed in context. Fernanda, for instance, says that not all of the roles she plays as a woman are valued, and that she doesn't necessarily feel freer as a woman because she is a *Naxi-í* member. These days her husband “gives her permission” to take part in the organisation's activities. However, to achieve this she first had to convince him, explaining in detail the activities carried out in meetings in order to persuade him that she wasn't doing anything wrong. Other women also enter into similar negotiations with their husbands, indicating that it is very difficult to develop equal relations inside the family. It also suggests though that the process of organising is contributing to changing gender roles, and that women have an active and fundamental part in this process. It is worth remembering that only a short while ago they had no right to speak or vote in assemblies, and that taking part in political activities or productive projects outside their homes was unthinkable.

27 This workshop was an element of the MAmP project, and had the aim of identifying the native words for the flora and fauna found locally, in order to promote the community's appropriation of its ecological and linguistic environment.

New Meanings in the Context of Globalisation

Globalisation tends to be analysed from an economic point of view, or as a phenomenon that is fundamentally linked to the means of communication. It is often explained as a series of measures taken to liberalise the economy and is identified with the great influence of multinational companies and with the expansion of the Internet and of information and communication technologies. These approaches suggest a collection of anonymous flows that move across the world without restriction and which impact on the daily life of people and social groups, without their being able to do very much about it. Furthermore, there is a tendency to equate globalisation and neoliberalism, and in this context to present neoliberalism as the only possible economic alternative, as natural, and as the destiny towards which all forms of social organisation tend.²⁸

In contrast to these unambiguous assessments, the authors of this article, following Daniel Mato²⁹ and Inda & Rosaldo,³⁰ view globalisation as the result of various historical trends which have served to intensify interactions between nations and peoples. These do not occur only in the context of asymmetric power relations. These interactions have cultural, political and economic dimensions that can only be separated from each other in analytical terms, and they are actually much more diverse than simply a process of homogenisation, or the merging of ways of life or cultural symbols.

Parallel to the trend towards globalisation, there is also a process of *localisation*. That is to say, globalisation implies as much a process of re-localisation as

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- 28 Karla Janiré Avilés González and Adriana Terven, introduction to *Entre el Estigma y la Resistencia: Dinámicas Étnicas en Tiempos de Globalización*, Karla Janiré Avilés González and Adriana Terven (Mexico, CIESAS, 2011). Karla Janiré Avilés González and Y. Ibarra Templos, "Identidades Sociolingüísticas y Migración Internacional: Reacciones frente a la Discriminación," manuscript submitted for publication, 2013.
 - 29 Daniel Mato, "Esboço para uma Linha de Investigação em Cultura e Transformações Sociais em Tempos de Globalização," in Marisa Vorraber Costa and Maria Isabel Bujes (eds.) *Caminhos Investigativos – Riscos e Possibilidades de Pesquisar nas Fronteiras*, (Brazil, Dp&A, 2005). Daniel Mato, "Cultura y Transformaciones Sociales en América Latina en Tiempos de Globalización," in Daniel Mato, Maritza Montero and Emanuel Amodio (eds.) *América Latina en Tiempos de Globalización: Procesos Culturales y Transformaciones Sociopolíticas*, (Caracas, UNESCO/Asociación Latinoamericana de Sociología/Universidad Central de Caracas, 1996).
 - 30 Jonathan Inda and Renato Rosaldo (eds.) *The Anthropology of Globalisation. A Reader*, (Singapore, Blackwell Publishing, 2008).

de-localisation.³¹ Furthermore, the local and the global are not mutually exclusive: the former needs to be understood as an aspect of the latter.³² As we shall see in the case of the *Naxi-í*, the mass production of symbols and cultural information is not creating a global culture. The re-localisation of these discourses actually produces a multiplicity of different scenarios, because individual interpretations of those symbols and information vary. The experience of the *Naxi-í* shows clearly that Mazatec women are not passive receptors of external messages, but rather agents who create new meanings through a process of dialogue.

The organisation's activities have been marked by contact with associations and persons outside the community. Notable among these are various civil organisations based in the capital of Oaxaca State (including CAMPO, as mentioned), as well as other institutions working at national level or based outside the country.

The *Naxi-í* has worked with these organisations in the analysis of gender relations as well as in various productive projects. Through work with civil associations, government and non-government organisations, and multilateral agencies, concepts and new ideas such as *empowerment*, *gender equity*, *citizenship* and *politics* have reached San Jeronimo Tecotl. They are now familiar terms which are important to *Naxi-í* members, and their lives have been transformed and enriched through this experience. An example of this relates to understanding the term *politics*. For the women, "this is not an issue which solely relates to political parties or the government," but rather an activity in which all participate, which "has to do with everything in society, whether in the community, in school, at work, in the state, and also in the country...for example, the work that women undertake in a community for the benefit of all."³³ Although this vision of politics is close to radical democracy and the construction of a citizenship which is not simply passive, it has not limited the involvement of women in formal political spaces. The women participated for

31 Ulrich Beck, *¿Qué es la Globalización? Falacias del Globalismo, Respuestas a la Globalización*, (Barcelona, Paidós, 1998).

32 With this in mind Roland Robertson proposes the term 'glocalisation', as a concept that better explains economic and cultural phenomena (Beck, *¿Qué es la Globalización?*).

33 Beck, *¿Qué es la Globalización?*, 14. Ixkic Bastian Duarte (Duarte, *Desde el Sur Organizado*) found similar reflections in relation to *politics* in an organisation of Nahuatl women in the south of Veracruz state, which are close to those of liberation theology. The perspective developed by indigenous women, together with the non-governmental organisations with which they work, is closely related to the construction of active citizenship and radical democracy.

instance in the development of the *Manual for Encouraging Political and Electoral Participation by Indigenous Women in Oaxaca*.³⁴

We found these and other concepts written on posters which are hung up in the spaces where activities are carried out, and also in materials that they have put together to promote the participation of women in the state.³⁵ According to this explanation, the *empowerment of women* is achieved through analysis of one's own environment. Following the popular education tradition of Paulo Freire³⁶ and Participatory Action Research of Orlando Fals Borda,³⁷ they describe this process as consciousness-raising. Empowerment also requires having confidence in themselves, and the strengthening of self-esteem which in turn requires the broadening of work, educational and economic opportunities. This kind of empowerment should not only be for women, according to the *Naxi-í's* thinking, because as such it would be incomplete. Instead, it has to take men into account too, because only by working together is it possible to construct equitable gender relationships.

What has already been said about the *Naxi-í* experience shows that globalisation cannot be reduced to economic elements; rather it has a cultural dimension that includes political elements. The women we have referred to are transforming their culture by looking at it anew. Its particular forms are integrated into their understanding of community dynamics. The initial understandings of terms that have arrived in the community as part of the process of globalisation, such as *gender equity*, or *empowerment*, have been appropriated and transformed by these actors. They show us that meanings are generated within social movements, and that *transnational* voices also participate in this process.

Final Reflexions

In Mexico, as in many other places, there is a tendency to think that indigenous women, simply for the sake of being such, are *destined* to live in situations of gender inequality which are more severe than *western* or *westernised* women

34 Iniciativas para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Oaxaqueña A.C and Naxi-í, *Manual para Fomentar la Participación Política y Electoral*.

35 Iniciativas para el Desarrollo de la Mujer Oaxaqueña A.C and Naxi-í, *Manual para Fomentar la Participación Política y Electoral*.

36 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogía del Oprimido*, (Rio de Janeiro, Paz e Terra, 1970).

37 Orlando Fals Borda, "Por la Praxis: el Problema de Cómo Investigar la Realidad para Transformarla," *Servicio Social e Sociedad* 11 (1982).

who experience for example physical or psychological violence, or various kinds of dependency. The Mazatec women with whom we have worked call into question this stereotype however, by reflecting within the context of their own culture on inequalities between men and women, and in proposing strategies to construct equitable gender relations that take their own context into account.

The organisational trajectory of the *Naxi-í* therefore calls into question unambiguous understandings of gender relations, language, identity and globalisation. They show that ethnicity is not synonymous with *oppression*, nor is it the antonym of *modernity*. Neither is *tradition* opposed to change. We have suggested that processes of organisation and social transformation such as those undertaken by the Mazatec women can be seen as renewing political and cultural identities, but also indigenous languages. Through these processes indigenous subordinated groups redefine concepts and practices, broadening the spaces for political action. The Mazatec women we have referred to are developers of social meaning and not simply reproducers of external discourses. Organisational processes are also processes of reinterpretation. This finding leads us to ask ourselves what are the meanings of global discourses, such as gender equity or the empowerment of women, in indigenous contexts.

The stories and activities analysed here show that globalisation, understood as the *intensification of communication* and of *global linkages* rather than an exclusively economic process, has played an essential role in the organisational process of the women of the *Naxi-í*. They have been able to establish support networks that contribute to the empowerment of Mazatec women, as well as to reactivate indigenous sociolinguistic practices. In the same way, the experience analysed opens the way for reflection on contemporary societies, by showing that while the homogenizing tendencies of globalisation are undeniable, possibilities for linguistic and cultural revitalisation also exist.

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