ICWA
LETTERS

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Settling In

MEXICO CITY, Mexico December 1997

By Chenoa Egawa

I think it is a rare bird that can draw up a plan of action, move to another country, and carry out that plan as it was written. I arrived in San Cristobal de las Casas a few days ago with my list of contacts, credentials, and references in hand. My housing arrangements had already been made by way of a contact in Mexico City, which I have since learned is quite a remarkable accomplishment for a newcomer. As I had been told over the phone (I had never seen the house first hand) the *casita* (little house) turned out to be a good find, except for the fact that it did not have a telephone. I should have seen the symbolism. Communication in terms of networking can be problematic, or at least, very different than what is customary in the United States. Here in Mexico, establishing relationships takes time and they are built on trust and friendship. In Chiapas, Mexico, given the current volatile political situation, they take even more time, and more trust. You cannot call and schedule an appointment, and expect to go in, get right down to the heart of the matter with your list of questions in hand, and come out with a story. Nobody will tell you that outright, but it becomes quite obvious real fast. There are several good reasons for this.

First of all, San Cristobal de las Casas has always had a steady influx of people from all parts of Mexico, North America and Europe. Since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, however, many more have come to learn 'all there is to know' in a month or less, and return home. From conversations I have had with folks around town, I have heard that other foreigners have had difficulties regarding attempts to interview local organizations. Apparently, if you do not plan to be here for at least a month, many people at the organizations feel hard-pressed to talk with you at all. I have noticed that one of the first questions I am always asked is, "How long do you plan to stay?" When I tell them six months to a year, they seem very relieved. They usually go on to say, "Oh, you have plenty of time. Don't worry." In other words, do not worry about learning everything right away. It will all come in time. How much time, I wonder? Sometimes I think I should tell them two months, just so we can get on with it! That is, however, a very American attitude that I must do away with quickly! In all fairness, many people have been working here with community organization and development projects for years, and it is understandable that they do not feel a need to divulge their whole story to a perfect stranger in one or two encounters.

Secondly, the political situation has been described as "very complex." For example, I was told in one interview that many new indigenous organizations and cooperatives have entered the picture since 1994, resulting in a sea of new projects and programs in native communities. According to this source, it is important to understand what these organizations really stand for, how they are organized and where their funding comes from. Which political party do they support? Under what conditions have they been funded? Do they support the indigenous movement, or do they simply *say* they do in order to take advantage of funding opportunities? If they support a political party other than the *Ejercito*

Zapatista de Liberacion Nacional (EZLN), why are they interested in working with indigenous communities? Maybe they exist in order to monitor activities and new developments within the communities and are not really there to help improve living conditions at all. This second point also ties in with the issue of safety. It is not safe to go to many communities any more, because of the low-intensity warfare in the region. To go with people who know the lay of the land, know where it is safe to visit and have already established confidence in a community, is really the only way to go. It is extremely important to know how to walk in this terrain if one hopes to stay in the country!

Obviously, it is going to take persistence, determination, patience, time and precaution to develop relationships built on mutual trust and confidence with people from the different organizations and communities. I was talking with a man I met in the main plaza during a recent Zapatista manifestation. He asked where I was from and what I was doing in San Cristobal. On an instinctual level, I trusted him (although when I think back on it now, I wonder if I should have), so I told him a bit about my interests and the difficulties I was having making connections with local organizations. He agreed that it was hard to develop good relationships in San Cristobal, and in the indigenous communities throughout Chiapas.

"The way I see it," he said, you need to spend time in the communities to learn first-hand how their organizations function, but it is very difficult to go to a community and expect to talk with anyone if you don't have connections. If you go into a community and tell them that you are interested in learning about cooperative development in indigenous communities, the first thing they will wonder is - what is behind that interest? Who do you work for? Why do you care?"

No word is taken at face value, and the only way to get past this barrier is to establish trust over time. Relationships then, must be established with people in the offices in town first. If someone is interested in helping me further my study, they will offer to take me to visit the communities with whom they are working. That way I would have credibility.

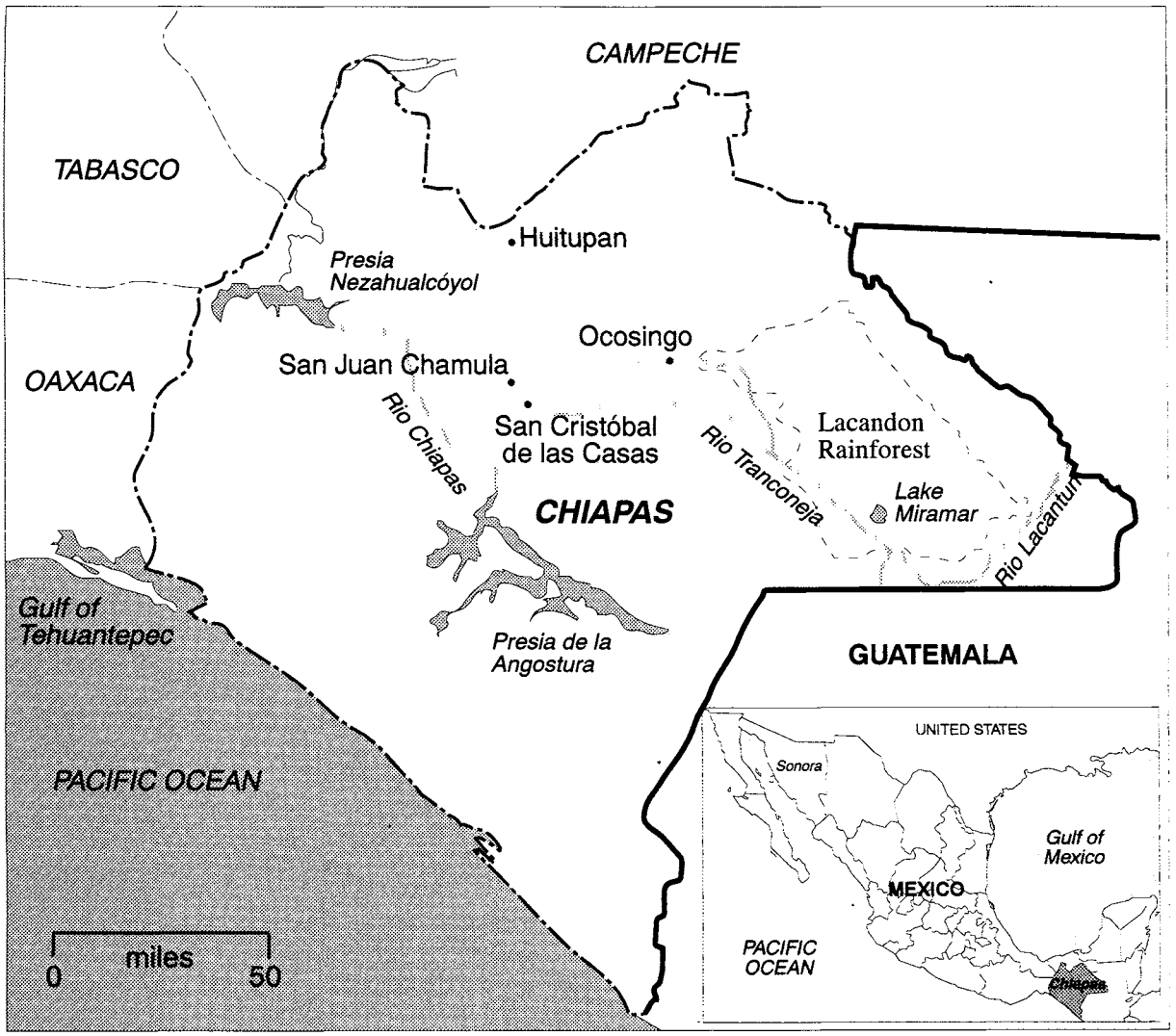
Despite the list of complexities, and the gradual learning and integration process here, I have been able to collect a few interesting bits and pieces from two organizations in San Cristobal. One is from *K'un K'un*,[1] a weaving cooperative, and the other is from the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropologia Social (CIESAS)*.[2] Both are working with indigenous communities in production-oriented organizations, and both have already had contact with a North American tribal cooperative or organization. I do not have their complete stories at this time, so all that I can offer are a few pieces of the puzzle. If I want to know more, I will have to do my time!

K'un K'un, has offices in town surrounding a large open-air patio and garden area, with numerous rooms and work stations set up for weaving, sewing, natural dye production and product sales. At this cooperative, the men do the weaving on huge, standing looms unlike the smaller, backstrap looms I have seen the women use. The artisans produce both traditional and contemporary designs and products. The wool is prepared and dyed on site, using all natural colors extracted from flowers, plants and bark. In the little store located on the grounds they sell everything from *tapetes* (weavings), to pillows, bedspreads and clothing. I believe the products from *K'un K'un* are also sold at other locations, although I am not certain.

I had heard of *K'un K'un* through a woman named Patty Gerowitz, who owns a studio in Seattle where she produces natural dyes for fabrics. It was through Patty that I learned of an exchange program that was just starting up between *K'un K'un* and a women's Navajo weaving cooperative out of the Four Corners area in Arizona. I was told to look for Maddalena Forcella, the woman who manages the cooperative with her husband, Luis Morales. She was not in the first time I stopped by, but I was able to talk with Lucy, the woman in charge of the dying process for the wool. I was given a quick tour, and told to check back the following day to talk with Maddalena.

The next morning I headed over to *K'un K'un* again, and this time Maddalena was the first person I encountered. Although I could not conduct a detailed interview with Maddalena on this first visit, I found her to be very open and friendly. She referred me to her husband, Luis, for a more complete summary of *K'un K'un's* story, but to this day I have been unable to reach him. I did, however, ask Maddalena about the exchange program with Navajo, and she told me of the first encounter the two cooperatives had last spring. One elderly woman from San Juan Chamula, a Tzotzil village of 40,000 inhabitants located about 10 kilometers northwest of San Cristobal, traveled to Arizona with Lucy and Maddalena. Apparently the woman had never been too far from home, so this trip, at her age, was certain to be an adventure. The air travel was fine because in two short flights totaling approximately three hours, the plane touched down in Phoenix. The hotel there was no problem either, and she seemed to be enjoying herself. During the next leg of the journey by bus, however, Maddalena began to notice changes in the woman. It was as if she was beginning to realize how far from home she was actually traveling. Apparently, she had not realized the distance that was covered during the two short flights, but on land, in the bus, she could see the changes of the countryside as they

[1] K'un K'un is a from the Tzotzil language, and translates as, Little by Little.
[2] The English translation of CIESAS is The Center of Investigation and Superior (or Higher) Studies in Social Anthropology.



traveled out of Phoenix, into the mountains, and through the desert.

When the *K'un K'un* delegation arrived in the Four Corners area, their Navajo hosts greeted them with an opening event titled, "Sheep is Life." In this workshop, the Navajo presenters talked in detail about their relationship to the sheep, and the importance this animal had in their daily lives. In addition, the Navajo weavers gave weaving demonstrations. The woman from San Juan Chamula was supposed to give a presentation demonstrating Tzotzil weaving and dying techniques, but by the time she was to go on, she had completely shut down, or gone into shock, as Maddalena explained it.

The Navajo people use sheep not only for their wool, but also for food. On the contrary, the Tzotziles from Chamula would never eat one of their sheep. They use their sheep for the wool, but aside from that, sheep are practically considered part of the family. So, when the Navajo people served their guests mutton at mealtime, the Chamulan woman went into deeper shock. For her, it was the equivalent of cooking up a child or a relative. Obviously, she could not eat the mutton. It upset her so much that she could not even talk and she had absolutely no desire left to give weaving demonstrations.

As Maddalena was recounting this story to me, we both could not help but laugh. She said it was quite sad that it had happened, but it was something that they were unable to foresee. There were other difficulties as well. The Navajo, like the Tzotzil, and most other tribes for that matter, have learned to be very wary of any outsiders, given the history of native peoples within dominant societies. As a result, there was hesitancy on both sides to engage openly in conversation. Furthermore, there is apparently a lot of distance separating homes on the Navajo reservation, and after the initial introductory workshop, the *K'un K'un* delegates had a hard time making contact with other Navajo women from the cooperative. Maddalena did say, however, that despite these difficulties, there were many beautiful things about the Navajo culture that their hosts shared with them, and as a first encounter there were a lot

of positive things learned on both sides.

K'un K'un is currently planning the next exchange in February or March of 1998. Two Navajo women will come to San Cristobal to stay with the people at *K'un K'un* for two to three weeks. One of the women is older, very traditional, and uses traditional weaving methods; the other is younger, has a university education, and incorporates contemporary designs in her weaving. I will try to strengthen my relationship with *K'un K'un* in the meantime, so that I may report back, in more detail, on the second encounter of the two cooperatives.

The other interesting contact I have initiated is with Ron Nigh of *CIESAS*. I spoke with Ron, who has been Director of *CIESAS* for several years, and he told me of several projects that he is working on as an associate member with a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) called DANA (the name of a Hindu fertility goddess). All NGOs emphasize the creation of projects on sustainable economic development in indigenous communities, which will be owned, operated and managed by the communities themselves. All projects are currently in the development stages, and DANA is working to provide technical assistance, training and marketing workshops. The project I was particularly interested in combines ecotourism and organic agricultural production in the *Ejido Emiliano Zapata*.

Lake Miramar, the largest of fifteen lakes in the Lacandon Rainforest, is the site of the ecotourism project. It is located near the southern edge of the Lacandon rainforest, approximately 65 miles southeast of Ocosingo, and the ecotourism services are run by the four communities that together comprise what is called the *Ejido Emiliano Zapata*. This particular *Ejido*, or communal land base, was established in the late 1960's for Chol Mayans from Sabanilla and Tzotzil Mayans from Huitiupan. Lake Miramar is in the mountains, surrounded by humid, tropical rainforest, with three major rivers flowing into the lake. The purpose of the project is to generate more economic resources for local communities, while also promoting preservation, protection and appreciation of the lake and the rain-forest.

The lake is still clean and pure, and the jungle surrounding it is rich with lush, exotic vegetation and wildlife, such as crocodiles, howler monkeys and tropical birds. The communities have started out by building a small facility that offers camping sites or traditional-style community housing to tourists. There are composting latrines, garbage bins to recycle waste products and specific areas set aside for washing clothes. Tourists are not permitted to wash their clothes in the lake, and biodegradable soaps must always be used. There are areas within the camping grounds for tourists to cook over open fires, and many foods are available for sale through the central community cooperative store. Before tourists come into the area, they are informed about the rules they must follow in order to maintain respect for the land and the people living in the communities. There are numerous activities that tourists can engage in including snorkeling, scuba diving, fishing, hiking to caves and archaeological sites and sightseeing on and around the lake by rowboat. DANA and the *Ejido* are also working on ideas to expand the benefits of ecotourism to the numerous outlying communities that live along the three major river estuaries emptying into Lake Miramar. They are currently talking with wilderness guides in the U.S. about the potential for securing donated canoes that would allow them to start guided river tours.

Tourism has created several job opportunities within the communities, particularly for younger people who can work as guides, manage boat rentals, operate small supply stores, maintain camping areas, provide translation and work in other service-oriented jobs. The communities have already had good results from this project and are enthusiastic about expanding the current services. A problem with expansion, however, is that the land has a definite limit, or carrying capacity. If the area is opened to too many tourists there are bound to be negative impacts on the lake, the forest habitat, the wildlife and the people of the communities. Apparently it will be a challenge to put a ceiling on the number of tourists that come into the area, because at this point, the communities are seeing only the benefits of income produced. DANA is working with the *Ejido* to create alternative sources of income through other projects in an attempt to diversify the local economy and avoid problems that total reliance on ecotourism would eventually bring into the communities.

The production of organic rice is one option for diversification that has potential for several reasons. The people in the communities have a long history of working with and caring for the land, so they are already very skilled farmers. They have their own seed for the rice, and have been growing, harvesting and selling it at the local level for quite some time. In addition, the land, climate and terrain are all ideal for growing rice. The agricultural project will include planning for expansion of current production levels, processing and marketing. DANA hopes to work with the *Ejido* communities to produce enough, high-quality organic rice to market regionally, nationally and internationally. In order to develop this plan further, DANA and *Ejido* members have been working with the Indigenous Trading Company (ITC), a U.S.-based Native-American organization that is interested in working with indigenous communities in Mexico to assist them in value-added processing and international marketing of their products. ITC has been working closely with another group called the International Indian Treaty Council (IITC), an indigenous human-rights organization with 23 years' experience working for and with native peoples of the Americas. Because of IITC's long history of well-established connections with native peoples in Mexico, I believe they were able to provide a very natural lead for their more recent work in economic development led by ITC. ITC has been meeting with agricultural producers from indigenous

communities in Mexico for the past two years.

I first heard of ITC through conversations I had with *Coordinadora Nacional de Organizaciones Cafetaleros (CNOC)*[3] staff members in Mexico City, and then again when I met with Ron Nigh at *CIESAS* here in San Cristobal. I had just missed meeting delegates of ITC myself. They had been in San Cristobal to continue discussions with Ron the week before I arrived here. ITC has been talking with Ron, DANA and the *Ejido Emiliano Zapata* for more than one and a half years to study the potential for assisting the *Ejido* communities in increasing production, value-added processing and international marketing of organic rice. ITC would like to help set up a centrally located warehouse and processing plant for the rice that would also be equipped to store and process other locally produced products such as coffee, cacao and medicinal plants. During one of their many visits here to meet with DANA and the *Ejido*, ITC representatives brought along a man who owns and operates a California-based organic-rice growing and marketing business. After seeing the excellent potential for increased rice production around Lake Miramar, the man offered to assist in finding affordable equipment that the Ejido could use to process the rice.

I know that this agricultural project is still in the planning stages, and that ITC is currently drafting a business-implementation plan to find investors for not only Lake Miramar, but other districts with indigenous communities in Chiapas, Oaxaca, Tabasco and Sonora. From my very basic understanding of the project thus far, it looks like the foundation has already been laid for what could be promising relationships between tribes of the U.S. and Mexico. These particular relationships would be based on providing economic development assistance, but the fundamental issues and concerns of indigenous peoples, such as higher standards of living, self-determination, human rights, access to basic services, education, health and cultural restoration and preservation, would also be figured into the business equation. I look forward to following the progress of ITC with indigenous communities in Chiapas and throughout Mexico. I hope that alternative economic development solutions created for and by indigenous peoples of the U.S. and Mexico, will be unique in that we can always maintain the vision that it is for the people, and that the benefits must improve conditions for all those involved.

I am planning to stay in San Cristobal de las Casas, Chiapas for at least six months. At this point in time, I have made many initial contacts with indigenous organizations that are involved in either artisan or agricultural production, and I am certain that I will be able to build good relationships with at least some of these people. There are many more that I have yet to meet that are involved in developments that are equally intriguing. Indigenous peoples in Mexico are still fighting for self-determination, and many good ideas are thwarted by those sectors of society that do not want to see native peoples have the freedom to decide their own destiny. However, despite the low-intensity warfare, the political complexities and the issues of establishing confidence and trust, the people of the organizations and communities continue to move forward in an effort to secure the rights that are due to them as citizens of Mexico. They continue to seek alternatives that will allow for viable sustainable economic development at the community level, so that they have a secure economic base from which to function. I am encouraged to see the interaction that is taking place among native peoples of the U.S. and Mexico here in Chiapas, and in other states throughout Mexico. I believe there is much to be shared and learned on both sides. ❑

[3] The English translation of CNOC is The National Coordinator of Coffee-Producing Organizations.

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