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Is the Sparrow Hawk Dying?



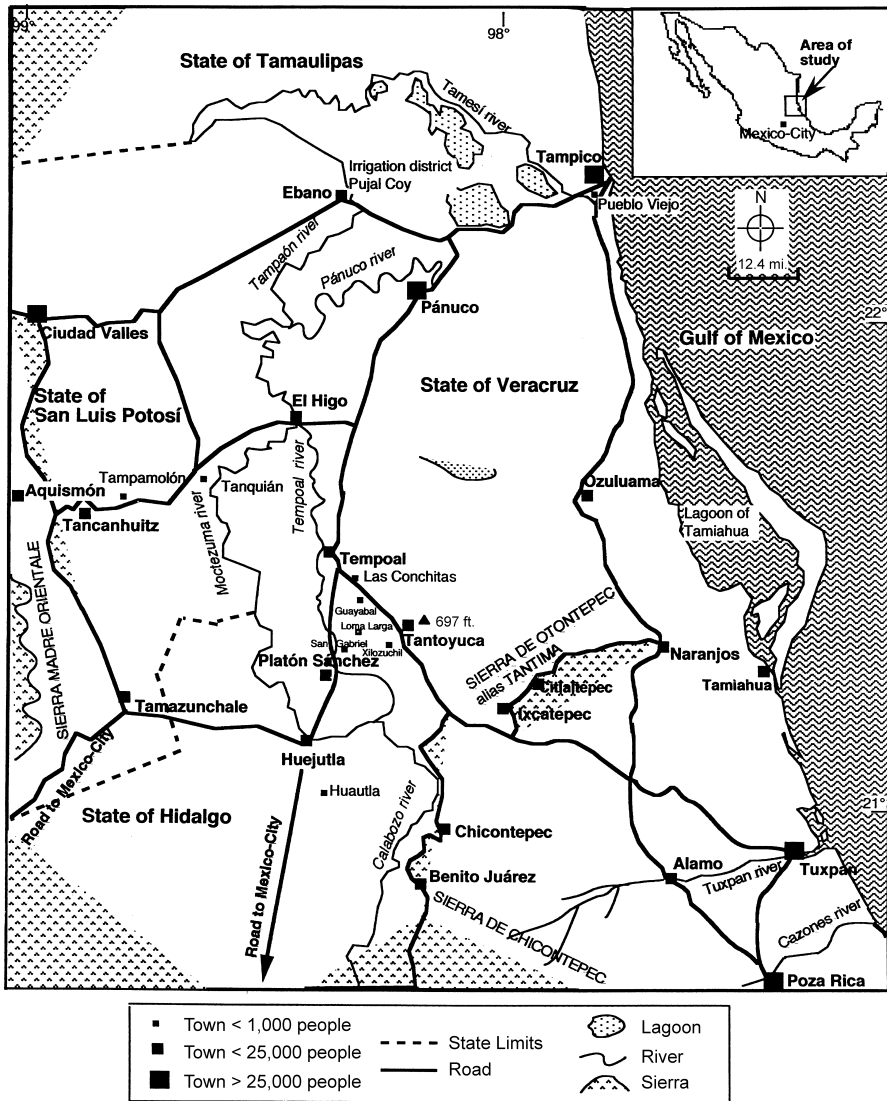
“WHY AREN’T YOU STUDYING THE NAHUAS INSTEAD?” I WAS ASKED WHEN I TOLD employees at the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) in Chicontepec of my plans to undertake a research project on the Teenek Indians of Veracruz, Mexico. I was asked this question over and over by many people—teachers, civil servants, activists with peasant organizations, local scholars, even anthropologists—during my two-and-a-half-year stay in the region of Tantoyuca, and I asked myself the same question during the many moments of despair and exasperation that marked my fieldwork.

The Teeneks do in fact have a bad reputation. Early on the Aztecs considered this people—whom they conquered during the fifteenth century—subservient, nasty, and obscene. Spanish chroniclers described them as drunken, dirty, and backward (Sahagún 1977: vol. 3, 204; Díaz Del Castillo 1977: vol. 2, 85). The author of an eighteenth-century catechism manual written in Teenek complained of this people’s lack of ability, compared with the Nahuas, to assimilate the rudiments of the Christian faith (Tapia Zenteno 1985: 14–15). At present, in northern Veracruz and to the southeast of the neighboring state of San Luis Potosí—over which this ethnic group is spread—the Teeneks are considered less enterprising than the Nahuas (with whom

they share the same territory), lazier, less congenial, more obtuse, stubborn, surly, and suspicious with regard to the outside world. And regarding the Teeneks from Veracruz, apart from speaking an indigenous language, they do not exhibit the fact that they are Indians: they do not wear traditional clothing, do not celebrate specific rituals or important ceremonies, do not participate in the system of religious offices (the *cargo* system), do not show pride in their ethnic affiliation, and—on the contrary—demonstrate a rather puzzling sense of self-denigration (“we are dirty, foolish, ignorant, timid; we are less than nothing”).

The a priori lack of interest in this ethnic group is reflected in the minimal amount of research devoted to it up to now. And yet, the opinions that have been offered about this group, some of which date back a long time, indicate rightly or wrongly how the Teeneks have been marginalized and thus that there is something unique about them. This observation was my point of departure. It appeared to me that this group challenged certain preconceived ideas about ethnicity—defined here as the social construction of an adherence to an ethnic group—and about the acculturation that resulted from the famous encounter of the two worlds that was celebrated or cursed when I was beginning my research. Indeed, alongside the celebrations or anticelebrations of the fifth centennial of the “discovery” of America, there was (the past tense may not be necessary) a lot of talk of the resistance of the Indian culture. This observation referred mainly to the elaborate demonstrations, the protests revolving around stolen rights, denunciations of social injustice, and demands for the recovery of ancestral land as well as native languages and cultures. This type of protest cannot be found among the Teeneks, who express a strong awareness of their difference although perceived negatively, which inspires initial questioning concerning the basis for their collective identity.

The Huasteca region in northeastern Mexico (see Map 0.1) is defined according to several criteria: historical considerations (the cultural sphere of the Huastec civilization¹), geographic considerations (its topography and humid, tropical climate), and socioeconomic considerations (interdependence at the very heart of the region and the predominance of cattle ranching). The region is inhabited by a multiethnic population composed of Teenek, Nahuatl, Tepehuan, Otomí, Totonac, and Pame Indians, as well as the mestizos—a group representing the intermixing of members of this population, Spanish people and their descendants, and blacks introduced as slaves during the colonial era. The Huasteca region covers parts of several states: northern Veracruz, northeastern Hidalgo, southeastern San Luis Potosí and Tamaulipas, and to a lesser extent the extremities of northeastern Puebla



Map 0.1. Huasteca Region

and Querétaro. Because of its agricultural potential, in particular with regard to cattle ranching and the cultivation of sugarcane, the Huasteca region of Veracruz, which forms the framework for this work, was from the beginning of the Spanish Conquest (1522) a place of colonization and thus of occupation of Indian land and of cultural and biological intermixing.

Today the region is divided into two contrasting sections: the coastal plains, where whites and mestizos (these are social categories) are primarily involved in raising livestock—whether in extensive or intensive ways—and the foothills of the eastern Sierra Madre, where mestizos and Teenek and Nahuatl Indians cultivate food crops. For some, crops include commercialized agricultural products, whereas others (especially the Teeneks) grow crops intended exclusively for their own use, without the intervention of recent modern technical assistance.

An important path of communication that connects the country's capital to the port city of Tampico crosses through the center of the region under study, which is relatively flat and accessible. Tantoyuca, the district town, has been an important commercial and administrative center for the entire region since the colonial era. These conditions—both topographical and social—seem extremely favorable to an accelerated and generalized process of cultural intermixing, to social mobility, and to the relinquishing of an attachment to a stigmatized ethnic group. In fact, the Teeneks' visible cultural specificities have without doubt diminished, but their presence as Teeneks, despite such fading, persists distinctly compared with the other social groups present.

In this region where the social hierarchy is based on ethnic affiliations, the Teeneks, who live in the foothills, are on the lowest level. Descendants of the Huastec culture that gave its name to the region, they have been subjugated and acculturated twice—first by the Aztecs and later by Spanish and other Western civilizations. As a result, the ethnic traits and characteristics of this society have gradually been obscured over generations. Yet today the group presents a rare profile, combining apparent acculturation and self-denigration with a strong sense of ethnic identity sustained precisely by the group's extreme political, economic, and cultural marginality.

Three-quarters of the Teeneks of Veracruz, concentrated in the *municipio* of Tantoyuca, with a population of around 43,000 (1990), make up half the population of the district. Their peculiarities are manifest in several ways. First, the Teeneks characterize themselves as such—as different from their Nahuatl, mestizo, and white neighbors—and they are viewed as different by those groups. If there were a local and qualifying scale of "Indianness," the Teeneks would be located on the lowest level—below the Nahuas, who consider the term *Huastec* the worst form of insult. If the endogamy that exists within the social groups present is not completely strict, it exists *de facto*. Furthermore, apart from the district town and a few recently established hamlets where inhabitants of diverse ethnic origins coexist, the villages around Tantoyuca are generally made up of members of a single ethnic group. There

is also a hierarchy of poverty, following which certain Nahua and mestizo peasants own some livestock or attain the status of “producers” by planting commercial crops such as citrus fruit, whereas the Teeneks are once again found on the lowest level—alternately relying for their survival on food crops intended for their own consumption (corn and beans), on crafts made of agave and palm fibers they sell at the local market, and on seasonal work in the region. As for the terms of land ownership in Tantoyuca, those of the Teenek villages originate in the communal agrarian structures dating from the colonial or republican eras. The postrevolutionary land grants were primarily conferred upon Nahua and mestizo groups, whereas wealthier whites and mestizos own their land following the regime of private property. All these characteristics—the origins of which will be examined later—seem somewhat simplistic, but they indicate an actual situation. This is indeed a multiethnic region where the configuration of the territory confirms the spatial, economic, and social divisions—based on boundaries of ethnic identity—among the social groups that live there.

This region is the fruit of history, a history that has made it an enclave in comparison to neighboring regions. It is a place where the indigenous population is concentrated and where there is also a smaller but powerful group of ranchers and where few agrarian endowments have been made. There is no industry or any other substantial economic concern other than extensive cattle ranching, an activity introduced during the colonial era and that continues in the present time without having been usurped by any other business. The region is characterized vis-à-vis its neighboring regions by a lethargic economy in which time seems to have stood still or at least slowed down. Yet it is far from exhibiting social and economic homogeneity. On all social fronts each group has constructed an identifying framework, metamorphosed and mutually conditioned throughout time. The diversity of the region is organized around a fundamental contrast between the plains and the foothills. Thus, because of its geographic position in the region, Tantoyuca is at the crossroads of these subregions with distinct realities—where ranchers and peasants, mestizos and Indians divide the territory among themselves, each group exploiting it according to different, unshared rhythms and logics maintained through rigid relationships. These two subregions, socially and economically constructed throughout history, together form the low Veracruzana Huasteca region and the background for this work.

My first contact with the inhabitants of Loma Larga, the Teenek hamlet where I conducted the largest part of my ethnographic research, took place in July 1991 in Chicontepec, during a regional dance competition organized by the INI. Nearly five months had passed since I had settled in Tantoyuca,

and I had been traveling through the region in search of the “ideal” Teenek community where I could delve into what I had provisionally formulated as the “foundation of Teenek identity.” At the competition a Nahua (naturally) group took first prize with the Aztec Dance. On top of their striking costumes the dancers wore ornate capes of blue velour, mirroring the image they have of their noble ancestors; and their steps and cadence were particularly elaborate. They contrasted eloquently with the Teenek dancers of the Dance of the Sparrow Hawk, who were also invited to compete and who appeared barefoot, wearing their everyday clothes—some of which were in tatters. While listening to the sounds of the small square drum and the bamboo flute and observing the dancers’ listless movements, I had the feeling that this dance came from very long ago, from a time that might be at the origin of that “foundation” I was seeking. At the end of the competition, in which the Teenek dancers won only a dish of mole, I accompanied the three performers to their village forty-five miles away. They were somewhat reticent and incredulous in the face of my interest. But out of this encounter with their leader, Dionisio, a musician and healer who subsequently became one of my most precious informants, a great complicity was born.

My enthusiasm at the idea of discovering exotic traits among the Teeneks waned as I started to live among my new friends from Loma Larga. I was persuaded that if this hamlet was the only one where the Dance of the Sparrow Hawk still existed—already condemned to disappear by Stresser-Péan (1947a), who had observed it in the 1930s in a neighboring village—my choice of settling there would lead me to similar discoveries of other traditional practices still being carried out. But anthropological literature badly prepares the novice for the realities of the field, and the data upon which demonstrations are constructed seem often to have been provided in a detailed way by informants. It was only after a year that people began to talk to me explicitly about their conceptions of misfortune linked to illness (or that I began to understand their meanings) and only much later that I was told of a few myths. What I discovered in the field was rather a complete disinterest in everything that attracted me—that is, everything that related to the traditional and the unusual. To my many questions about the whys and the hows of everything that occurred there, I did not even receive the banal response every anthropologist knows—*por costumbre* (“out of habit,” “out of tradition”)—but rather the exasperating and irritating *quién sabe* (“who knows?”).

The ambiance of anomy and profound dereliction that reigned everywhere began to invade me, and to escape from this contagious state of lethargy I began to study the terms and networks of kinship—a classical introduction to the inhabitants of a village and the relationships that connected them. It

was also a way to get people to talk about family, their history, and all the rest. During these conversations poverty was advanced as the reason for everything: exiguous lands, bad harvests, disastrous habitations, clothing in rags, deficient food, incurable illnesses, the absence of celebrations of festivities and of agricultural rituals, the abandonment of school by the children—all Teenek characteristics, according to conversations. A Teenek is thus a poor person who speaks Teenek. I even came to doubt my hosts' "Indianness," and I concluded that the differences, perceived nonetheless, were the issue only of a distinct economic reality that needed to be studied.

As my relationships with the inhabitants of Loma Larga gradually strengthened, I began to notice a sort of scenario in which I was told, to please me, stories, especially one story, learned in the schoolbooks and whose message was modernity. All the same, there remained a few realms in which I guessed the presence of another logic that had not bent to Western rationality. When I asked, for example, the names of the ancestors and descendants in families, I was often answered with a silence that seemed to reflect uneasiness. And when I later looked at the names some people had nevertheless agreed to provide me, for the most part they did not seem consistent with what others had told me. Furthermore, as everyone became more comfortable, people began to make timid remarks concerning transgressions I had unwittingly committed from the beginning of my stay: for example, you must not be in the fields at noon or excel in your work; you must not speak to drunk people; you must not rinse your face when you cross the brook below the village; it was preferable, if you found yourself at nightfall in a neighboring village, to stay there and not try to return in the dark; you must not drink hot coffee; you must not go to the home of a woman who has recently given birth; you must not pass a person in front of you on a path.

My initial observations led me to conclude that the Teeneks' poverty did not enable them to assume the costs of their ethnic peculiarities or, in other words, that they could not "afford their Indianness." Yet the concealed beliefs and practices linked to the supernatural and induced from religious syncretism, which cost nothing or almost nothing, continued to maintain a hold over the inhabitants. In Loma Larga beliefs and attitudes on the one hand and poverty and decrepitude on the other revealed an obvious tension between a specific mode of representation and the contemporary imperatives to which it was subjected. This tension, which is the reality of many indigenous groups incorporated into global society, has often been analyzed in Mexico and elsewhere from the perspective of capitalist exploitation and of the structure of social classes (Hewitt de Alcántara 1984: 170–174). However, the tension is also established in the process of cultural change, emanating

from the imposition or the influence that occurs when two different types of societies encounter each other. To understand the Teenek modes of representation, it thus seemed more useful to analyze their structural readjustments and their compromises as well as their interpretations of them. The theme of acculturation then imposes itself in the study of the foundations of Teenek identity.

Having had the time necessary to adapt my preliminary presuppositions to observable reality, I understood the error of my initial approach that postulated a system of explicit representation to be provided to me by my informants in the course of our convivial encounters and my observations. Here was a complete inherent logic, linked to the beliefs and practices about which I was told nothing in the beginning because, as I later understood, to my hosts I represented a society and a culture that had striven to extract those “idolatries” and that continued to do so through institutional campaigns. However, these beliefs nonetheless survived, for they ultimately responded to concerns to which the extirpators of every camp were unable to provide satisfactory responses. Thus early on it was necessary to convince my interlocutors of the value of what they had interiorized and that was perceived as “useless nonsense” by outsiders. That involved a lot of patient persuasion of the Teenek people with whom I lived so they could perceive their beliefs in a positive way before an outsider.

Moreover, I was not the only one to discover the Other. Loma Larga is located about ten miles from Tantoyuca, where the Teeneks go almost every day to sell their labor, their meager harvest, or crafts and to obtain essential provisions. But social relationships among Teeneks, Nahuas, whites, and mestizos are almost nonexistent beyond the earlier-mentioned exchanges; and the knowledge of the Other remains abstract to all concerned. Whites and mestizos and to a lesser degree the Nahuas in general show great disdain toward the Teeneks and express it in their behavior toward them. As for the Teeneks, they consider the Spaniards and their descendants to be civilizing heroes, and no mention is made of a worthy pre-Hispanic past. As regards the Nahuas, the Teeneks consider them to be poor peasants but more enterprising than they themselves are. In addition, an outsider, from the district town or farther away, rarely visits Teenek villages. At the beginning of my stay in this region, when I approached the borders of the villages around Tantoyuca, everyone fled and hid, closing the doors as if at an approaching storm; children ran toward their huts, crying loudly *ejek, ejek* (“Spaniard,” “mestizo”). Beyond the strange (because it was erroneous) impression of exploring these heretofore unknown lands, it was above all these reactions that perplexed me. We were, in fact, at the end of the twentieth

century and a few miles from a national highway and a large town. For reciprocal rapprochement it was therefore necessary early on to overcome the burden of history that weighed so heavily on our relationships. But what I was able to set aside gradually through conviviality turned out to be one of the essential introductions for the study of identity. Is not the vision of the Other crucial in one's perception of Self?

As in all analysis, that of ethnicity must disassemble and then reconstruct that which one inevitably takes as a postulate. The Teenek collective identity must be considered as a fluctuating element that derives its origins in a culture in which repetitions are never the same and in which history, by introducing discontinuities, brought about new cultural constructions there. In researching the foundations of Teenek ethnicity, it is therefore not only a matter of revealing symbolic practices or systems found in the contemporary Teenek universe that are considered original or "authentic" and that would have traversed the centuries without change. Nor is it a matter of retracing the history of contemporary configurations without considering the indigenous interpretations of those facts. The Teeneks are not only actors playing a cultural role or objects of a regional history in which they have participated, willingly or not. The task of analysis, rather, is to understand the process by which Teenek identity constantly acquires an authenticity—that is, a legitimacy and a consensus as much from those who currently identify themselves as Teeneks as by those with whom they are in constant contact. To fully understand Teenek ethnicity, I therefore started from the principle that the Teeneks are not simply manipulated actors undergoing changes, the reflection of the images attributed to them throughout the ages, but that in a complementary way they also wield their own theory of their history and their differences. To postulate a Teenek essence that has been altered throughout the centuries would thus be insufficient, and it would seem more appropriate—taking inspiration from Barth (1969)—to retrace the limits that permanently separate this group from Others, as well as to explore what those limits indicate on each side.

The analysis of ethnic identity perceived as a process of permanent identitary construction and of accommodations to the current historical context is, consequently, a study of the complex phenomenon of acculturation. More precisely, in the context of Amerindian societies, it is a matter of the interaction of value systems that is the issue of the contact between two heterogeneous cultures—one subordinate to the other and incorporated in that way to a new cultural system that disintegrates the subjected culture (Wachtel 1974). However, the interaction between the Teeneks and the Others is not uniquely the result of Spanish colonization and its repercussions. Before the

arrival of the conquistadors, the Huastecs were subjected to the Aztecs, and cultural exchanges were made in both directions. Furthermore, the Huasteca region was on the routes of many population movements, originating notably from the northern steppes. The Huastecs had thus been experiencing cultural influences and a process of acculturation for a long time, during which they assimilated external effects in their own way by adjusting the new facts to their situation. The study of Huastec history therefore begins with an “original syncretism” (Amselle 1990). In other words, paraphrasing Wachtel (1990), Huastec history involves an analysis of the uninterrupted acculturation of the “vanquished of the vanquished.” The Huastecs with their Teenek descendants were subjected to the cultural and religious influences of the Aztecs, the Spaniards, and contemporary Western civilization without abandoning their own identity. The analysis of that identity is therefore one of the permanent reinterpretation of the indigenous modes of representation following structural readjustments. As regards the acculturation process, it is necessary, as Bernand mentions (1992: 24), to distinguish between colonial acculturation—“that which is carried out between pre-industrial groups and which varies according to the status of those involved in the process and their social inclusion”—and modern acculturation—“founded on the notion of progress.” Farriss (1984: 390), following the same order of ideas, distinguishes the Westernization, or the impact of Europe on the non-Western world, from the complex forces of modernization; in her own words, “The West encountered America before becoming modern itself” (starting in the second half of the nineteenth century).

There are also different degrees of acculturation, if we consider the term as a continuous process of the change in cultural values carried out through the interaction between distinct cultural groups. The two poles of this series of changes are in fact only conceptual. It is difficult to imagine that a group in contact with another group would not experience the effects of that interaction; in such a case we would be dealing with the anthropologist’s secret fantasy. Conversely, the presence of a completely acculturated group means it has been entirely absorbed into a mass and thus no longer exists as it once was; therefore, it would not be “worthy” of an anthropological study. Furthermore, this mass that is called a global society—Western or hegemonic—is also an amalgam of intercrossed cultures, and one must then go beyond the vague approximation applied to the term *dominant culture*. The phenomenon of acculturation is thus the result of a tension between two conceptual poles between which various processes of integration, assimilation, syncretism, and disjunction that can follow each other over time are located (Wachtel 1974: 130–133). Each ethnic group (and its members taken individually)

affected in these processes of cultural duality thus attempts to find a delicate balance depending on its assets and on the social and historical contexts in which it is found.

At the time I was writing this book, bloody ethnic conflicts were occurring throughout the world (in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda, and elsewhere), emphasizing borders that were not always apparent but whose outline—resulting from a latent ethnic division and often not taken into account earlier—had become a political issue. In most cases the conflict was the outcome of a detonating event that disturbed the balance maintained until that point between the social groups involved and that incited an ethnopolitical mobilization. Such a situation is precisely a rejection of acculturation and a retreat into belonging, a sentiment that sometimes had almost been forgotten. In these contexts of ethnic conflict, as Wallerstein asserts (quoted in Wolf 1994: 10), “to make group identity politically efficacious, groups tend to strengthen boundaries, reject overlaps, demand exclusive loyalties.” But the Teeneks are not currently on the path to war, and analysis of the difference that exists between them and the Others, stripped of any confrontational discourse, enables us to approach the themes of ethnicity and acculturation in their “cruising speed”—that is, stripped of aggression and exacerbated demagoguery.²

Whence the formulation of the hypothesis of this work: if the feeling of ethnic belonging (ethnicity) is alive without the necessity of reinforcing lines by means of ethnic claims or the accentuation of difference, it is because the group in question does not feel it is in peril and senses that its reproduction, as such, is assured. Dances disappear, ethnic dress disappears as well, the traditional social organization appears disintegrated, rituals are no longer practiced, and yet the group persists in its difference. If these signifiers have a tendency to disappear, the same is not true for the signified that seems to survive in spite of the absence of those emblematic identity markers. What, then, are the boundaries that separate the Teeneks from Others and that are not necessary to reinforce? What is the overlapping that is not rejected and does not threaten the integrity of the group? Where do allegiances go? Are there areas in which there is no interference? What is the social organization that supports this group? In other words, what is the balance that enables the Teeneks not to dissolve into the global society and, while preserving certain specificities, not to be assailed by anthropologists?

Identity, as an object of study, escapes any attempt at definition. As Lévi-Strauss asserts (1977: 331–332), identity “is reduced less to postulation or to affirmation than to remaking, to reconstruction . . . identity is a sort of virtual home which is indispensable for us to refer to in order to explain a certain number of things, but without it ever having a real existence.” To

consider the Teeneks as an ethnic group is therefore only the beginning of my research rather than its postulate, and it is necessary to reconstruct the object of study both in its contours and in its content. And although identity cannot be defined, one can postulate that it is fashioned from intra- and inter-active systems that ultimately delimit the boundary between Us and Others.

Within this perspective, it is a question of understanding at the local level the indigenous cultural categories through daily practices and autochthonous representations of tradition. The classic realms of kinship, territoriality, social organization, and relationships to nature and to the supernatural provide much information on this point so we can detect the manner in which the differentiated perception of Self is acquired, transmitted, and each time reinterpreted. Changing the level of analysis, the picture is completed by considering the historical, social, and cultural phenomena that act upon the indigenous perception in a complex play of mirrors. The construction of the identitary object according to these different points of view introduces the notion of scale here. This approach enables us to understand ethnic identity in its relationship between the local and the global and according to diachronic and synchronic perspectives. These do not establish a contrast between historicity and the subjectivity of the informants; rather, they enable us to examine the Teeneks' permanent reinterpretation of their history. The region—as a space of direct interaction among the different social groups present and as an immediate place where more global historical and cultural evolutions occur—thus forms the general framework for the study of the identitary process that must not only be perceived at work today but that must also be reconstructed as it was fashioned throughout history (Van Young 1992).

TO CARRY OUT THIS PROJECT, I TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN THE REGION OF TANTOYUCA from March 1991 to September 1993. Afterward I lived in Mexico City, where for two years I analyzed the ethnographic material I had gathered and consulted archives and bibliographic resources. From Mexico City I regularly went into the field until I finally left Mexico in November 1995. In Tantoyuca the house of white cob I had rented served as my general quarters when I arrived in the Huasteca, as well as a refuge following stays in Teenek communities. It was also a place where my Teenek friends (and others) came to rest and restore themselves when they came to town. They left their machetes, sacks of corn, and other products acquired at the market to go to Mass empty-handed or so they would not be encumbered when they strolled around town. They spent the night there when they had stayed in town too late. They came to ask me for loans, for assistance with a task they had to

perform for the authorities, or for support following a run-in with the law (or rather with those who make the laws). They came in the middle of the night with a dehydrated child or a woman in labor in distress so I might provide financial support or serve as translator in their interactions with medical authorities. Finally, they also came to *platicar* (“chat”). These contacts with my Teenek interlocutors outside their community enabled them to observe me in another context—one in which they could see that I, like them, was foreign (although more at ease) in a world that at the beginning they believed to be my own, thereby providing them with a new scale for otherness. Moreover, when I wrote my trimestral reports to my sponsors, they saw me process on my computer the information they themselves had probably provided a few days earlier, and that information in their opinion then acquired a certain legitimacy or at least a new dimension established outside their community that endowed it with additional “truth.” This also perhaps enabled them to understand what I had come to do in their land (“to write a book on the customs and traditions of the Teeneks” according to my own declarations). But above all, these contacts enabled me to reestablish the annoying imbalance the anthropologist often experiences in the field—an imbalance that is the result on the one hand, because of the transitory nature of fieldwork, of the researcher’s inability to render hospitality and kindness from which he or she benefits, and on the other hand of the inexplicable nature of his or her work in the eyes of his or her hosts. My residence in Tantoyuca enabled me to be useful to the people who were the objects and the subjects of my study, which in itself, this must be recognized, was not of great interest to them.

Furthermore, the long conversations I enjoyed with a broad range of people—Teenek and Nahua Indian activists from peasant organizations, teachers, civil servants, high school students, and many citizens of Tantoyuca—enriched my knowledge of the place and its inhabitants and enabled me to specify the nature of the relationships that opposed the Indians and Others. There is, nevertheless, an element missing that is needed to complete this social palette with which I was in contact throughout my stay in the Huasteca. The local elite, composed of rich ranchers and large-scale merchants, effectively ignored me, since they saw me in the streets of Tantoyuca in the company of “subversive” Indians and peasants. The owner of my house—one of the richest people in the region—did welcome me into his home and introduced me to some of his acquaintances, but those relations, although cordial, were difficult. Furthermore, through my permanent contact with peasant organizations and regional institutions, I became familiar with many social and economic aspects, as well as with the political issues that affected communities

and that cannot be understood if one is confined only to the ethnographic realm. Visits to Nahua villages of the sierra of Chicontepec on several occasions, especially during festivals and rituals, enabled me to observe and evaluate the differences between those descendants of the Aztecs and the Teeneks who, although they share the same ecosystem and, in part, the same history, display a completely different attitude toward the outside world. Other visits to the “less acculturated” Teeneks of Tancanhuitz, in the state of San Luis Potosí, and to those—“more acculturated”—of the sierra of Tantima (or Otontepec) enabled me to evaluate the differences and similarities between them and their cousins from Tantoyuca.

The alternation between the more strictly ethnographic work in Loma Larga and my visits to Tantoyuca and elsewhere in the region caused me to travel each time from one universe to another. Each one, radically different, is impregnated with the history of regional social relationships. Thus, an understanding of the characteristics unique to each universe appeared essential for the analysis of that which forges the Teenek ethnic identity. These traits are perceived more particularly in the relationship each of the social groups present has with the land. Thus, a knowledge of the colonial and republican periods is fundamental for an understanding of the region and its inhabitants because the Spanish colonization of the Huasteca and the introduction of cattle ranching and the cultivation of sugarcane initially generated a reorganization of the regional space as well as the relocation of indigenous, Spanish, and mestizo populations. From those early times up to the contemporary era, these transformations seem to have marked the social and economic configuration of the region. That configuration is also the result of the evolution of an agrarian structure within the Huasteca, strongly influenced by the predominant activity of cattle ranching. Throughout this regional history, the pre-Hispanic social organization of the indigenous populations was transformed into colonial and republican modalities, and the agrarian structure was modified by the introduction of new economic activities. Indian territories were consequently reduced, but the Teeneks were able to recover their usurped lands or to constitute new holdings by patiently waiting to seize opportunities as they arose over those centuries. Contemporary Teenek communities are thus the fruit of those efforts, and they constitute the social framework that has preserved that ethnic group.

PART I OF THIS BOOK CONCERNS THE CONTEMPORARY TEENEK UNIVERSE AND THE relationships maintained locally among the Teenek and mestizo societies. It begins with a short description of the geographic framework and the historical processes that explain the current configurations. It continues with a

portrait of the social and natural landscape in the district of Tantoyuca and in its chief town, the commercial and administrative center for the majority of Veracruzán Teeneks. The profound disparities that contrast the mestizo ranchers with the Indian farmers provide a key to this local society and support in large part the identity perception of the Teeneks, who essentially live within the framework of a community. This term has multiple senses: the community is, according to the laws of agrarian reform, a legal property structure; it is also, in fact, a municipal subdivision, also called “congregation”; it is, finally, with its internal division into hamlets, the immediate social framework of the Teeneks. The different community authorities, both civil and religious, serve as bridges between the village and the mestizo outside world, and it is through them that the filtering that finally enables the communities to preserve a certain autonomy occurs. Teenek kinship and marriage relationships are analyzed in Part I by emphasizing above all the importance attributed to them within the communities, where local endogamy is the guarantee of group preservation. This tendency toward endogamy—which, in the end, is not unusual for a small ethnic group—nevertheless comes from several combined factors such as ethnic consciousness, preservation of agrarian patrimony, and the isogamy that will be analyzed in Part I. Finally, the analysis of the land problem of the community of San Lorenzo, which opposes it to its mestizo neighbors, reveals in a concrete situation the local agrarian history as well as the Teenek notion of community that links kinship to the right of access to land. Further, the ins and outs of this conflict synthesize the entire position of the Teeneks toward the society that encompasses them.

In Part II we will become acquainted with the beings of the Teenek underworld that are found at the origin of illnesses; they are also the prehuman ancestors who have fled the “light” and who thereby organize the register of otherness. The analysis of the modes of Teenek religiosity linked to the conceptions of misfortune and illness thus brings to light a particular vision of the world and stresses the demarcation that separates the Teeneks from the society that surrounds them. This difference concerns the spatial and social organization of the Christian and pagan autochthonous universes through which the distinction the Teeneks make between Them and Others is perceived.

In Part III we will see that this demarcation does not come only from the universe of symbolic representations but—covering economic, social, and cultural aspects—that it resides at the core of Teenek ethnicity. Finally, after an analysis of how the Teeneks differ from Others, we will delve into the still present vestiges of the Mesoamerican tradition³ in Teenek dances and myths

to reflect on the processes of transmission of collective memory in a context of assimilation of exogenous cultural values.

To conclude, we will enlarge the reflection—starting with the material presented—into questions of ethnic identity, of cultural intermixing, and of the process of acculturation in a context of marginality. These three themes are closely linked, but they do not cover exactly the same parameters—for acculturation does not necessarily signify deculturation, and mixing can remain selective when the foundations of identity still have meaning for the social actors and when the latter can express them in a marginal space that, however, is their own.

WHEN I ARRIVED IN LOMA LARGA, I WAS SHOWN A SMALL MOUNTAIN THAT RISES TO the south of the village. It was explained to me that in the past Thunder had lived there but that he had left to live elsewhere, for he had not wanted to live among the multitude of people who had come to settle in the area. Thunder, the Mesoamerican god of wind and rain, is no longer among the Teeneks of Loma Larga, but his presence remains alive in memories despite the “civilizing” actions exercised since the conquest. This work proposes to make those ghosts appear through an analysis of the beliefs and customs practiced today in the explored Teenek areas. It also proposes an analysis of the important moments in Teenek history, vectors of cultural discontinuities and reconstructions. History and ghosts join together, then, to fashion the “memory of tradition” (Becquelin and Molinié 1993)—a place of encounters and fusions, of religious syncretisms, of reorganizations, inventions, and permanent adaptations that form the principle of contemporary Teenek identity.