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Nuu Shaavi, The Land of Rain

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE MIXTECA REGION

It is said that Benito Juárez was once asked to describe the geography of the Mixteca region. He responded by crumpling up a piece of paper. That is what the area looks like. It is extremely irregular, with many small valleys between rippling steep mountains. The terrain is so difficult to tame that even today most of the roads are dirt and many communities are accessible only on foot. Both paved and dirt roads go around precipitous turns and hills, hugging the sides of the mountains. Landslides and mudslides are common occurrences. The extreme fragility of the soil in the region adds to the incidence of slides, and the torrential rains wash away soil from the cornfields as well as from the roads.

While these conditions present difficulties to the contemporary visitor, they have had important effects on the Mixtecs who live there. The villages are found in isolated nooks in the landscape and conditions are not conducive to intervillage cooperation. Geographic isolation is compounded by, or perhaps is a cause of, the practice of village endogamy: people usually marry people from the same community, thereby reducing the possibility of alliances among villages. This may be a continuation of pre-Hispanic social organization: according to Pérez Ortiz (2003:26), each community was actually a lineage and all the members were kin.

These factors, in turn, have had significant effects on culture: the Mixtecs have a long history of intervillage conflict (Terraciano 2001:227–28) and each village has its own version of the Mixteco language. Each village also has pre-Hispanic cultural

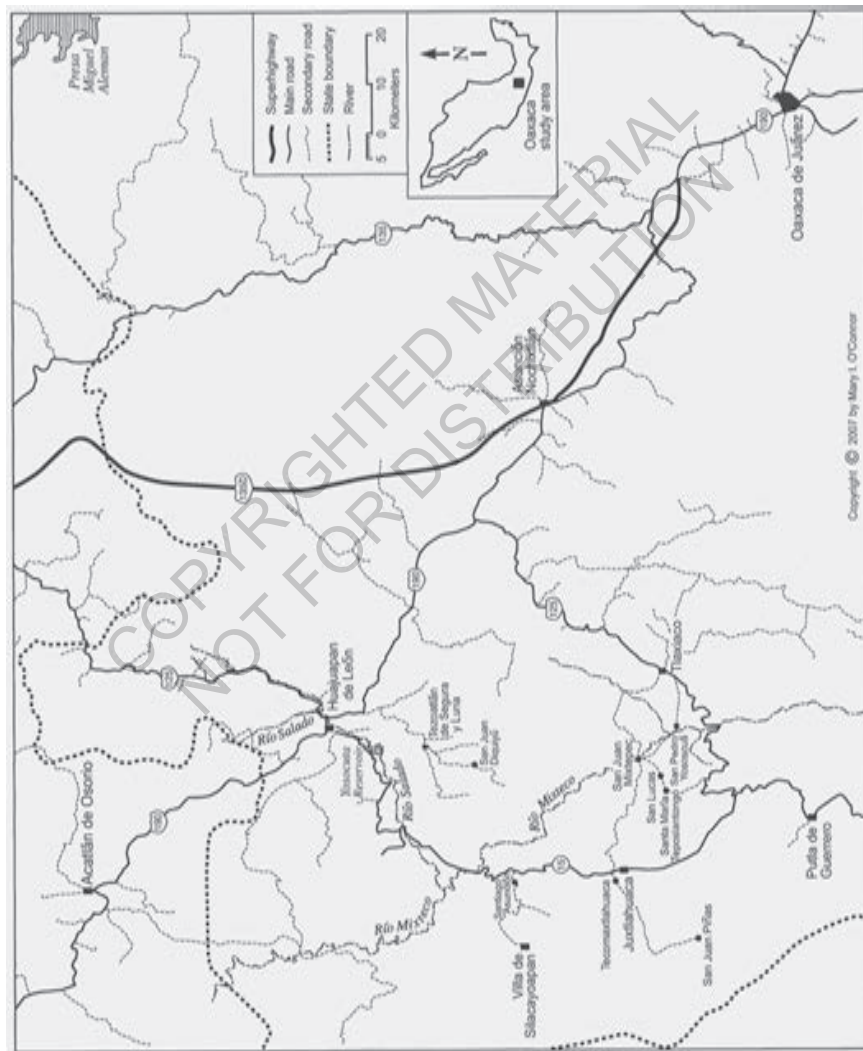


FIGURE 1.1. Map of Mixteca region. Map by Mary I. O'Connor.

and social traditions that help identify the residents of that village. These beliefs and practices include healing, birth, death, and agricultural complexes that are outside the scope of this work. All these aspects of Mixtec life have combined to create a situation where identity with the home village is all-important. Taken together, all of these conditions have influenced the way that present-day migrants, traveling from the villages to the rest of the continent, construct their identities. Even in Tennessee, Mixtecs from the same communities tend to find each other and congregate together.

THE SPANISH CONQUEST AND AFTERWARD

When the Spanish arrived in the Mixteca region in the 1520s, they described the region as densely populated, wealthy, and productive, with a complex social organization and a flourishing agricultural economy (Terraciano 2001:1–3, 198). No one would describe it that way today. The Mixtecs had developed a complex system of irrigating and terracing the steep mountainsides in order to expand the amount of arable land. The terraces, along with the native vegetation, protected the soil from being washed away in the rain.

The Spanish introduced cattle and horses. These animals trampled the terraces and ate all the plants and trees that had no thorns. Eventually, only plants with thorns remained and sheep and goats largely replaced cattle and horses. At the same time, large parts of the forests were cut down for fuel, leading to further degradation of the soil.

Although the Nahuatl word *Mixtec* means “land of clouds,” the Mixtec name for their world is *Ñuu Shaaui*, “the land of rain.” The combination of the abrupt landscape (much of it is vertical) and centuries of overgrazing has resulted in extreme soil erosion. Today, the Mixteca region is considered arid, despite the fact that the amount of rainfall¹ in other conditions provided more than enough water to support viable agriculture (Edinger 1985:16–49). There are parts of the contemporary Mixteca region that are blasted landscapes of eroded red dirt suitable only, in the words of one resident, for use as a setting for a Hollywood film set on Mars. There is no shortage of land; there is a shortage of land suitable for agriculture.

There are, it is true, small subsistence farms in the region. Most of them are planted to corn, beans, and squash—the traditional crops—although today it is cheaper to buy corn imported from the United States or Canada than to produce it. But people plant the same plot every year, using seeds saved from the year before and fertilizer from animal manure. If we discount the cost of labor (which is worth little or nothing here), a kind of subsistence can be wrenched from the soil. That is, if the rain comes at the right time and if floods do not destroy the fields. There are also goats and sheep as well as some horses, donkeys, and cattle. Still, the residents of



FIGURE 1.2. Eroded hills next to a cornfield.

the area are mostly very poor: Oaxaca, the state where most Mixtecs live, is among the poorest in Mexico, and the Mixteca region is one of the poorest in Oaxaca. It is not a tourist destination, generally speaking.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION IN THE MIXTECA AREA

Most Mexican states are organized into two levels of political organization: *municipios* and *localidades*. The *municipios* correspond roughly with counties in the United States. *Localidades* are entities within the *municipios* and include everything from large cities to single dwellings. Mexico has historically been very centralized, and small villages in most states have one or two political posts. The *municipio* leadership appoints people to these posts; they are not elective.

Oaxaca differs from this pattern in several ways. First, there are thirty *distritos*, which comprise a level of bureaucracy between *municipio* and state. The *distritos* elect members of the national Senado and Cámara de Diputados, the Congress. Huajuapán de León and Juchitán de la Mar are two Mixtec *distritos* from which large numbers of people emigrate (Mines, Nichols, and Runsten 2010:9). The communities discussed in this book are in these two *distritos*.

Municipios are within the *distritos*. They have several different committees, all elected, with the *presidente de municipio* at the top. These leaders are elected every

three years. Within the municipios are *agencias*. These are small, fairly autonomous villages. Within the Mixteca region, members of *agencias* decide whether the leaders are elected or named in the process known as *usos y costumbres*. The vast majority of Mixtec villages follow the tradition of *usos y costumbres*.

POLITICS IN MIXTEC VILLAGES: USOS Y COSTUMBRES

The state of Oaxaca recognizes and supports fifteen distinct indigenous groups whose members live in the state. The constitution recognizes that their communities were in existence before the state of Oaxaca and cedes autonomy to them as to their internal organization. This includes the political, economic, social, cultural, and jurisdictional scope of the laws. The constitution recognizes the power of the community authorities in accordance with the uses and customs (*usos y costumbres*) of the community (*Diario Oficial del Estado de Oaxaca* 1998:519–26). This echoes the changes in the national constitution, effective in 1992, that protects “specific forms of social organization” (Garma Navarro 2002:38). This, in turn, is a response to indigenous demands for recognition that have emerged in many Latin American nations since 1992.²

Unlike most other Mexican villages, the Mixtec *agencias* have a full court of community positions. In addition to the purely political posts, many posts appear to be entirely religious. All of these positions are filled each year during an assembly to which all the families in the *agencia* send a representative, and the assembly decides who will take on the duty of each post during the following year. In most cases, the decisions are made in a complex set of discussions about who will be selected for each post; these discussions take place over the course of several years prior to any assembly. So, at the annual assembly, most of the participants know who will be designated for each spot.

It is mostly in the *agencias* that the tradition of “*usos y costumbres*” persists. This system is also known as the civil-religious hierarchy (Monaghan 1995:78–93) as well as the *fiesta* or *cargo* system. It is found still in some of the areas of Latin America where there are indigenous populations, but most systems are changing or disappearing because of the penetration of the global marketplace. In the Mixteca region, the *cargo* system is a very important way of establishing and continuing the tightly knit social organization of the villages. Allegiance to the village, and membership in the village, are maintained even as more and more people leave for better opportunities (actually, the only opportunities) for work. Today, *las autoridades*—the authorities in the top echelons of the system—still control politics in the villages.

The civil-religious hierarchy consists of two sides, the civil and the religious.³ Each side has many different committees, all of which must be filled every year.

Participants (and every family must contribute members to the system) alternate between the civil and religious sides. As community members ascend the hierarchy, the cargos become more complicated, difficult, and expensive, but participants also gain in village prestige and power. They become members of the various committees that are responsible for running the community. These include committees for protecting the natural resources of the village, as well as for providing candles and flowers for ceremonies in the church, dressing the saints in the church, hiring the band for the fiesta, overseeing the land and water rights of the villagers, and overseeing the schools. The highest committee on the civil side is the *agencia* committee, and the most important on the religious side is the *mayordomo*'s committee. The next *agente* and *mayordomo* are selected from these committees.

The *agente* is the recognized political representative who participates in the decision-making processes at the (higher) *municipio* level. He is also expected to be available to make decisions about the *agencia*, to settle disputes between villagers, and to cooperate with the religious authorities in preparing for the annual fiestas celebrating the feast days of particular saints. In the past, most *agencias* had several fiestas in addition to the one dedicated to the patron saint (usually, the saint for whom the village is named). While some *agencias* still have several fiestas every year, nowadays it is more common for there to be only one fiesta per year. This is a direct result of the integration of local communities into the market system.

The *mayordomo* organizes the religious side of the fiesta. Families within the *mayordomo*'s social network, as well as participants in the lower echelons of the civil-religious hierarchy, are expected to contribute both food and work. The money for such elements of the fiesta as the fireworks, the bull riding, and other incidentals is also contributed by the *mayordomo* and his circle. Taken together, those in charge of the fiesta are responsible for a very large variety of different tasks, some of which must be shouldered by people on the lower rungs of the hierarchy. Although Catholic members of the village see all of these activities as part of the tradition of *usos y costumbres*, and the traditional activities which give meaning to their identity with the *pueblo* as a whole, the non-Catholics⁴ generally see them as a waste of money. Increasingly, the Catholic migrants also see the fiesta system as too expensive. Rather than abolish the fiestas, they would like to see them simplified.

In order to maintain their rights as members of the village, families must contribute members who will occupy posts in the civil-religious hierarchy. This requires a full year of work without pay, contributions of money and/or services, and participation in the folk-Catholic belief system. In the context of massive emigration to the north, with the concomitant exposure to the modern world of capitalist consumption, it is remarkable that the fiesta system is still in existence in the Mixteca.

Indeed, the continuation of participation in the fiesta system by migrants has drawn the attention of anthropologists and sociologists (Rivera-Salgado 1999; Besserer 1999, 2004; Kearney 1995a, 1995b, 1996, 2000).

The ongoing allegiance to and identity with the home villages has led to the formation of transnational communities. The community becomes all the members of the village, no matter where they are. Kearney (1995b:237) describes these communities as existing in “hyperspace.” According to Besserer (2004:112),

In the great transnational topography of these communities, the diverse dimensions of community life (economic, educational, and cultural practices, births and deaths, etc.) take “place” up and down the whole transnational topography. That is, the transnational communities are multicentric, multidirectional, multidimensional, and express domains of gender. (author’s translation)

Herein lies the difficulty facing Mixtec villages today. On the one hand, a large percentage of the members migrate to the north, but most of them still want to maintain ties to their pueblos. In so doing, they want to continue supporting the activities that are the basis of their identity with their villages: the cargo system. On the other hand, even many Catholics are less willing to contribute to the expenses associated with the religious aspects of the fiestas than they were when they lived in the village full time. The non-Catholics present a threat to the continuation of the traditional community, because they reject all of the fiesta activities. The Catholics say that if the non-Catholics, members of the village, with family in the village, refuse to participate in the traditions of the village, then the community ceases to exist. The non-Catholics say that it is good that the community as it was is no longer because it was based on beliefs in Catholic saints, which are the work of the devil. Despite such contentiousness, since 1992 Catholics and non-Catholics have learned for the most part to coexist. The community as it was no longer exists, but there is still a community. And it is a transnational community.

In addition to participating in *usos y costumbres*, villagers are required to send one member of the family for one day each week to provide *tequio*. This is a form of *corvée* labor that was at one time found in most traditional communities in Latin America. Like the civil-religious hierarchy, it has largely disappeared or turned into a system of cash payments rather than actual labor in most cases. This change has not happened in the Mixteca because there are enough unemployed family members to support *tequio*, even in villages that have experienced extensive emigration. Failure to provide *tequio* results in a fine, which can be seen as payment instead of work.

The numerous civil and religious posts, along with the requirement of *tequio*, produce a system in which almost every family of each village is involved in some kind of community activity. Everyone *really* knows everyone else, for they have all

cooperated on numerous village committees and frequently work on the same village projects. It is the quintessential face-to-face community.

For the visitor from the outside, the system seems very rigid and authoritarian. However, Monaghan (1995:78–93, 238–55) demonstrates that the sponsors of Mixtec fiestas are actually in rather egalitarian relationships with other villagers, relatives, and fictive kin, who make major contributions to the fiesta system even when they are not holding formal positions in the hierarchy. In addition, even in the most traditional villages not everyone goes to the top of the hierarchy, usually because they cannot afford the expenditures. Instead, they become members of committees that do not require a significant expenditure beyond a year's worth of work.

The culmination of village life is the *fiesta mayor* itself. This brings together all of the various elements of the village politico-religious organization, providing the actors with visibility, prestige, and, ideally, power. Villages vie for recognition of their fiestas. People come from all around the area to eat, drink alcohol, attend the dance, watch the bull riders and the procession, attend Mass in the church, and watch the fireworks.

Fiesta sponsorship incurs great expense but is considered to be a declaration of the prestige of the sponsors and a demonstration of village solidarity to the visitors who attend the fiesta. It is also, to some extent, a measure of the state of the fiesta system itself, as it has been affected by emigration from the villages. In *agencias* from which there has been a great deal of emigration, the fiestas were, for a while, much more elaborate than before people began leaving. Migrants would earn and save more money working outside the Mixteca than they had ever known before and would establish their status in the *agencia* by spending large amounts of money on the fiesta. However, as they have become more involved in the international market system, migrants expend less money on the fiestas. They support the idea of the fiesta, but in various ways would like to see its costs reduced. They would rather give service by being members of the civic committees.

Throughout Latin America, markets and money increasingly define the terms of trade and conspicuous consumption replaces conspicuous giving as the basis of prestige (Erasmus 1977). The fiesta system, based on conspicuous giving, loses adherents and eventually disappears or is changed into a system where every family contributes the same amount of money to the fiesta. One of the ways that village members opt out of fiesta sponsorship is by becoming non-Catholics (e.g., Dow 2001:76). In fact, Catholic Mixtecs often accuse the non-Catholics of converting specifically in order to avoid contributing to the community's cherished customs. Non-Catholics respond that they will take on more of the civil tasks, but in some villages they are not allowed to do this. One person said to me that in his village, you could not be an *agente* until you had been a *mayordomo*. In other words, you

could not become the political leader of the village until you had been a fiesta sponsor. Practically speaking, this prevents any non-Catholic from becoming a political leader in the agencia.

POLITICS AND RELIGION

Unlike many Latin American nations, Mexico has had freedom of religion since the middle of the nineteenth century. Subsequently, the constitution of 1917 was seriously antireligious and also anti-imperialist. The Catholic Church was divested of all properties, including church buildings and schools. Foreign clergy were not allowed into Mexico. This excluded the many Spanish Catholic priests in Mexico at the time but also the Protestant clergy, many of whom were from the United States (Bowen 1996:33–35).

These major political shifts did not seriously affect the Mixtec pueblos, however. To this day, they hold a significant amount of power against the incursions of political authorities at the state or even municipio level. The traditional village authorities would never allow any non-Catholics to enter the village to proselytize. The changes in religious allegiance in the villages would probably never have come about except as an importation by members who had left and returned. It was only when migrants began returning to their villages as converts to Evangelical churches, and challenged the entire system by refusing to participate in the fiestas, that the problem became local. The non-Catholics refused to help pay for those parts that seemed to them a waste of money, which basically included all aspects of the fiesta. These challenges have set off conflicts in most of the villages of the Mixteca, for even a few members of such tightly woven communities who reject the whole basis of society bring the threat of serious disharmony.

MIGRATION AND RELIGIOUS CHANGE

Although people had begun migrating from the Mixteca in the nineteenth century, the great majority remained home. About 7,000 participated in the Bracero Program between 1942 and 1964 (Espinosa Hernández 2003:26). Eventually, Mixtecs migrated to the northern Mexican states of Sinaloa, Sonora, and Baja California. It was not until the 1980s, however, that the largest waves of immigrants left their homeland. Between 1980 and 1988, nearly 100,000 individuals migrated from the Mixteca; this represented 30 percent of the population (Espinosa Hernández 2003:27).

The migrants to the north confronted a totally new way of growing crops as well as many challenges to their understanding of life. The fields of northwest Mexico

are flat and extend sometimes to the horizon. The crops are grown using chemical pesticides and herbicides, as well as chemical fertilizer. The farm laborers worked for wages that, although very small in comparison with the average worker in Mexico, were considerably more than most Mixtecs had ever known. The housing, in camps, was cramped and dirty, and people lived crowded together, in contrast with the typical Mixtec village, where the houses are separate from each other.

When Mixtecs went north, they encountered non-Catholic missionaries for the first time. The fact that there are other religions besides Catholicism was a revelation, as there were almost no non-Catholics in the Mixteca region before 1980. Although the missionaries were not allowed into fields or the camps, they presented programs, films, and other information just outside the boundaries of the camps. They handed out tracts and cassette tapes of sermons. They made a few converts. The number of converts increased with the increase in migration from the Mixteca.

In the late 1980s, the opportunities for migration expanded dramatically as the fields in the San Quintín Valley of Baja California Norte were brought under cultivation (Novo 2004:217). Although this area had been divided into *ejido* (land reform) communities during the 1950s, the lack of water in what is essentially a desert made for sparse farming and, consequently, a small population. In the 1980s, Mexican developers financed by US bankers sank wells in the valley floor in order to obtain the water necessary for irrigation and greenhouse agriculture. The developers of the San Quintín Valley sent buses to the Mixteca region of Oaxaca to recruit workers. The bus drivers gave very positive descriptions of the conditions in San Quintín in order to secure contracts with Mixtecs. The conditions were no different than those in Sinaloa, but there was more work: the valley of San Quintín is much larger than the fields of Sinaloa. The original residents of the valley were soon outnumbered. By 2001, according to Teresa Macías Herrera, the head of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista in San Quintín, 60 percent of the population of the San Quintín Valley consisted of indigenous people from Oaxaca (Macías Herrera, pers. comm.).

San Quintín offered an open field for missionaries: importantly, it is close to the United States. In Baja California, far more missionaries arrived than had gone to Sinaloa. The Mexican missionaries were supplemented enormously by US missionaries, who had a great deal more resources: money, Bibles, used clothes, films about the Bible, and cassettes of sermons and of stories from the Bible. All these materials were given to the people who attended the services, often held in tents in the open desert. The services tended to be popular, as they featured music, food, and other gifts, and as there were few other sources of entertainment in the valley. Large numbers of migrants converted to non-Catholic religions in San Quintín. Today, there are hundreds of non-Catholic churches in Baja California, largely made up of migrants from southern Mexico. Many of them are Mixtecs.

When the migrants returned to their villages, they had great tales to tell of their experiences; they also had cash, never in great quantities previously in the region, and consumer goods such as blenders and stereo systems. Eventually, going to the fields became an annual event participated in by people in most of the villages of the Mixteca. By the late 1980s, many Mixtecs began to go to the United States, mainly to California. Here, they made more money even than in the fields of northwest Mexico. Today, most Mixtec migrants go directly to the United States, although there are still substantial populations of Mixtecs who make the US-Mexico border areas their permanent homes. These communities are part of the transnational phenomenon that now extends to more than half of the United States.

At the same time, the 1980s was a period of tremendous economic change and disruption in Mexico. The international debt crisis, which is still being dealt with, began in 1982, when Mexico defaulted on its loans. Multilateral banks reacted by imposing crushing debt repayment plans based on economic restructuring. This led to the end of most government social support programs. The rate of migration began to increase dramatically. It was also during the 1980s that the number of non-Catholics in Latin America began to grow much more quickly than it had before (Martin 1990; Stoll 1990). Among Mixtecs, these processes are related: migration resulted in part from the curtailing of government support systems, combined with opportunities to work in the north. And it is migrants who first converted to non-Catholic religions.

THE CHURCHES

The Evangelical churches to which migrants have converted have similar, though by no means identical, organizational structures and belief systems. All of the churches stress the importance of the Bible as the guide for all aspects of life. For them, the Bible is the true word of God. Salvation is gained through committing one's life to God, daily reading of the Bible, and spreading the Good News, according to the Bible's injunction to go forth and teach all nations. In the ceremony of baptism by immersion, the individual is "born again," a new person who is committed to live according to the interpretation of the Bible espoused by a specific church doctrine. Although these interpretations may vary, there is enough overlap between most Evangelical denominations to allow for members to conduct services together, if a particular church is not available. Opposition to the Catholic Church is a major factor in uniting the various denominations.

With the exception of the Seventh-day Adventists, the churches in the communities where I worked are Pentecostals. This means that they interpret speaking in tongues and other trance experiences as baptism by the Holy Spirit. This

refers to the passage in Acts 2:2–4, where the Apostles congregated in Jerusalem for Pentecost. As they were sitting together, they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and “tongues as of fire” appeared over their heads, and they began “speaking in other tongues.” Members of Pentecostal churches believe that speaking in tongues (also called glossolalia) is a demonstration of being filled by the Holy Spirit, just as the Apostles had been on Pentecost Sunday; thus the name Pentecostal. When asked to describe the way they feel while speaking in tongues, converts often say that it cannot be described in words. Many Spanish-speaking Pentecostals describe their experience as “*gozo*,” or bliss.

Although being a Pentecostal means belief in baptism by the Holy Spirit, not every Pentecostal achieves this in his or her lifetime. Some denominations stress speaking in tongues as an important goal and specify how to attain this. Generally, fasting, praying, and reading the Bible, along with participating in emotional services where loud, rhythmic music is played, and moving in prescribed ways, are behaviors that are said to lead to trance. In some Pentecostal congregations, members speak in tongues at most services. However, in many, the experience is not common.

Usually, Evangelical churches are organized into groups based on sex and age, and each group is responsible for proselytizing as well as other activities. Each group makes a presentation to the congregation as a whole, usually once a week. Church organizations differ somewhat in the rigidity of their hierarchy. Some place an emphasis on top-down organization, while others are more egalitarian and open. Some have strict requirements about how members should dress, what activities they may participate in, and what they should not consume. A common theme to all these denominations is the rejection of the worship of idols and the consumption of alcoholic beverages, illegal drugs, and tobacco. In order to maintain their abstinence, converts avoid occasions where such substances might be available. They also generally deplore events that have no clear economic significance or (non-Catholic) religious content.

THE CONVERSION PROCESS

Studies of conversion narratives recognize a three-part process in these stories: life before conversion, the conversion experience itself, and life afterward. In the case of converts to Evangelical Christianity, Peter G. Stromberg (1993:2–3) points out that these narratives are also structured in ways that “celebrate and reaffirm the dual effect of the conversion, the strengthening of their faith and the transformation of their lives.” Thus, although they are stories of individual experiences, narrative structures are, to some extent at least, based on the cultural context of the conversion experience. In the case of Evangelical Protestantism, conversion narratives

are an important aspect of religious services as well as proselytizing activities. The convert realizes the importance of creating a narrative in order to participate fully in the life of the congregation.

In the process of creating a new personal narrative, the convert finds “meaning for inexplicable daily events as well as other more profound issues of the human predicament, including undeserved suffering [and] death” (Rambo 1999:267). During this process, the individual develops a new personality and goes through a spiritual transformation. The belief is that in baptism, the old person disappears and is replaced by a new, reborn person who is saved and will go to heaven. This is symbolized by the act of baptism itself: the old individual is submerged in water and the new individual emerges from the water. While narratives coincide with church teachings, the acts of creating the narrative and imbuing it with meaning are individual activities that simultaneously result in a personal transformation, a rejection of the Catholic religion, and the acceptance of a completely new set of rules to live by. The individual’s belief in and experience of the divine are central to their participation in Evangelical churches. This participation cannot be explained purely in social terms (Rambo 1999:264). It is, however, the basis of the social activities of the believers.

A strong emphasis on evangelization in the non-Catholic denominations means that members are constantly accosting others with the message of the gospel. At work and after work, at children’s schools, in the grocery store, non-Catholics are looking for people to convert. This, in itself, differs from the practices of Catholics and members of “historical Protestant” churches such as Presbyterians and Methodists. Most Catholics approached by *hermanos* (brothers) or *hermanas* (sisters)—or *evangélicos*, as they are called—reject the invitation to attend a service, or to have free pizza, or to go to a film about Jesus.⁵ But some agree to go to some activity. Even most of these do not go further in the process of conversion, but some do.

In many cases, the individuals whose attention is captured by the Evangelical message have some problem, some difficulty in their lives. It could be an illness that seems incurable or that does not respond to the low-cost cures available to the average Mixtec migrant; in many cases, the sick person is a child. After the *hermanos* pray over the ill person or his/her child, the individual is miraculously cured. In other cases, especially in the migrant population, where alcoholism and drug abuse are common, the addiction is removed after the addict accepts Christ. The small congregation size and frequent services in these churches, along with abstention by all the church members, help reinforce the convert’s will to abstain.

Still other cases feature an individual who arrives in an unknown place, where he/she knows very few people. Having lived until then in a village where everyone knows everyone, where ties of kinship and *compadrazgo* are crucial,⁶ and where the

traditions continue back to ancient times, it is sometimes difficult to adjust to the life of a migrant. Some are robbed or beaten up. Some become homeless. People become disoriented, depressed, and can fall into despair. When such people are approached by someone with an invitation to a service, where they are welcomed personally to the group, where people pray for them and offer to help with their problems, the result is often that they accept some help. Even at this point, many Catholics do not continue on the path to conversion. Nevertheless, there are those who stay out of interest, or because they like the way the Evangelicals speak, or for other reasons. The intense, emotional characteristics of the services are important in this process; the emotional support from the congregations is also important. There are many instances of sudden conversions of large groups of people at very emotional services or at *confraternidades*, events that include numerous congregations and last several days. Even those who do not immediately accept Jesus as their personal savior are welcome as long as they attend services and participate in the prayers.

Some people who have been welcomed into the fold begin to attend services, and begin to obey the rules of the church; often they become aware that their lives are much more orderly than before. Having given up spending money on alcohol, dances, movies, and so on, they find they have more disposable income. They have more time to spend with their families. They have time and money to donate to the church and to participate in church activities such as sales of food to pay for evangelization projects. More often than not, they begin to believe that God is rewarding their faith and good works with material wealth, even if much of this is donated to the church. Members of these churches also tend to feel a sense of well-being, a peace, a certainty that what they are doing will take them to heaven, where they will receive a crown and where they will live forever with God.⁷

There is a distinct thread of millenarianism in the religious groups that Mixtecs join. The expectation that the Second Coming will soon usher in a time of peace and prosperity for those who follow the rules of the churches adds to the incentive to do so. The themes of living in heaven with God and of the imminence of Armageddon are repeated in the messages of the speakers at the services; they are also elements in many of the hymns that the participants sing.

HERMANA ADELA—MIGRANT AND CONVERT

For Mixtecs, the process of migration often runs parallel to that of conversion. Consider, for example, the story of Hermana Adela, who was born in the village of Guadalupe Morelos and is currently a member of the Centros Bíblicos in Huajuapán de León. When she was twelve years old, she and her mother and siblings began migrating to work in the fields of Culiacán, Sinaloa, and San Quintín,

Baja California. (Her father was dead.) Here, they began to see that there are more kinds of churches beyond the Catholic Church. Frequent activities of missionaries got the attention of the migrants. At that time (1976), Adela's family participated in the cargo system of the village. She was married at age fifteen, not an uncommon age for Mixteca brides even today. Her husband's family also participated in the civil-religious hierarchy of the village. When she was twenty-two or twenty-three years old (1985 or 1986), her husband's brother converted to an Evangelical church in San Quintín. He and three other members of the village were the first to convert. They began to talk to her family about "the things of God" (*las cosas de Dios*). Her husband refused to listen; soon afterward, he went to Culiacán by himself. Here we see the beginning of the interrelationship between migration and conversion as well as rejection of Evangelism by the residents of the village.

Adela had suffered from a problem with her eyes from the time she was twenty years old. They would itch, then swell up until they were closed. She went to several doctors about this, one of them a specialist, but they could not help her. She spent a lot of money, but got no results. Meanwhile, her brother-in-law continued to talk about the Bible and Jesus. She would not listen; she thought he was crazy. Then one day, she was alone and she found a copy of the New Testament. There, she read that Jesus Christ *heals people* (her emphasis). Later, she listened to a cassette that one of the converts had brought from Tecate, Baja California. The cassette also said that God cures people. She said to God, "If you exist, heal me." She said to herself, "If he heals me, I will serve him." Later, she listened to a tape specifically on healing, which told her to put her hand where the pain was. She said again to God, "If you exist, heal me, and I will serve you." Hermana Adela accepted Jesus that very night.

She was not actually cured that night, however. When I asked her if she was healed immediately, she admitted that the healing process took two years. Even so, she attributes her healthy eyes to a miracle by God. This is an example of how converts construct their conversion narratives to coincide with their newfound faith, eliminating certain facts that are bothersome.

Meanwhile, her husband returned from Culiacán. She tried to convince him to convert. He refused to convert and scolded her. She prayed for him but he got drunk. Things became difficult in their family. Eventually Adela and her husband, along with the brother-in-law who was among the first villagers to convert, went to San Quintín. By now there were many missionaries in the valley of San Quintín, and many congregations of Mixtec converts.

Here, the context changed. Instead of being in a remote village, surrounded by Catholics who thought they were crazy, they were confronted frequently by missionaries and Mixtec converts. This change is clearly important for the process of conversion. In San Quintín, there are religious *confraternidades*, meetings of large

numbers of believers. At these meetings, there are sermons, testimonials by individuals of their conversions, films, books for sale, and the opportunity to meet many converts over meals. Although Adela had begun to change in the village, she had to deal with her aggressive husband and other villagers who disagreed with her. Her husband refused absolutely to consider converting. In San Quintín, there was an Iglesia Pentecostés, a congregation with many Mixtec members. Adela asked the congregation to pray for her husband to convert. The following Sunday, there was an evangelization campaign. These campaigns feature films about the Bible and Jesus as well as individuals' testimonies of the miracles they have experienced. The missionaries hand out Bibles, tracts, and, in some cases, food and used clothes. They play loud, rhythmic music to the accompaniment of hymns. People are speaking in tongues. The emotional level of these services is very high, and while they are excited by the occasion, people are encouraged to go to the altar and accept Jesus. That same night, Adela's husband accepted Christ. It was not until 1991 that Adela was baptized, in an Iglesia Pentecostés in Tecate, Baja California. This case illustrates how, while there were very few converts made in the villages, people who had heard about the Bible and the word of God in their villages were more drawn to missionaries while they were in the migrant stream.

NON-CATHOLIC CHURCHES IN THE MIXTECA REGION

There are several non-Catholic churches found in the region. The denominations include the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, La Luz del Mundo, Jehovah's Witnesses, and others. The congregations of most of these churches are primarily in the district towns in the region. In other words, Mixtecs as a rule do not belong to them. The churches in the following discussion are those that have congregations in the communities where I worked.

CENTROS BÍBLICOS

In 1977 an Evangelical missionary from Monterrey named Heriberto Ledesma Martínez arrived in the region. He set up reading and health classes and gave counseling and other kinds of social support to the poor of Huajuapán. A catastrophic earthquake in 1980 provided an opportunity to help people in grave need while simultaneously planting the seed of awareness of other religions besides Catholicism. As people sought help, they looked to the *hermanos*, or *evangélicos*. The Evangelicals brought in more *hermanos* from outside the Mixteca to help. Eventually, Heriberto Ledesma bought a property in downtown Huajuapán and opened it as the Centro Bíblico in 1987.

By this time, a number of Mixtec migrants, including Hermana Adela, had returned to their villages as converts to a variety of non-Catholic churches. When the converts arrived, they made known their new religious affiliations. Most tried to convert their fellow villagers, but in general their approaches were rebuffed. Most Mixtecs had not left the Mixteca region, did not know of other churches, and thought the converts had lost their minds. In the mid-1980s, the number of migrants returning to their villages began to grow, as a pattern of circular migration began to take shape. As more people left and returned, the knowledge that there are other religions began to be known in many villages, whose members had converted while in the migrant stream. Even so, there was conflict between Catholics and non-Catholics. Some converts were expelled forcibly from their villages. Others were afraid to return from the fields of the north. Eventually, circular migration resulted in the transnational communities that today characterize Mixtec society, Catholic and non-Catholic alike.

Depending on where they had converted, the returned migrants belonged to a variety of different Evangelical denominations. When they returned to their villages, they found each other, but no one denomination was represented by more than one or two converts. There were quite a lot of differences as to the usage of jewelry, clothing, and other behaviors from one convert to the other, according to where and in what church they had been baptized. A custom developed in which converts who belonged to the same village participated in services regardless of the circumstances of their conversions. Eventually, these groups built churches and began proselytizing their fellow villagers.

The response to these activities by the Catholic villagers, migrants as well as stay-at-homes, was generally hostility. While villagers welcomed the money and consumer goods brought by returning migrants, they saw this new religious identity as something from the outside—a foreign import—which they did not want to accept. A major reason for the rejection of the new churches was the refusal of the converts to participate in the Catholic aspects of the fiestas. Religious conversion, which seemed like a personal choice in the context of migration, became a source of conflict in home villages.

With more and more migrants returning as converts, the situations in many of the villages became acrimonious. When the Evangelicals began to hold services, build churches, and proselytize, the problem escalated to the point of outright conflict. The converts did not want to reject every aspect of village life. Like the Catholics, they saw themselves as members of the villages. They wanted to live in the villages, maintaining their allegiance to and membership in the community. They also wanted the rights that come with village membership, which include the right to land and pasture for livestock, the right to build and occupy houses in the

village, and access to water and electricity and schooling for their children. All they wanted was not to participate in the fiestas. In other words, all they wanted was to reject the very basis of the community, according to the Catholics.

Eventually, the situations in some villages came to a head. The Catholics began by cutting off the water to the non-Catholics. Next, electricity was cut. When these measures did not bring the converts into line, they were incarcerated in the village jail. Eventually, they were physically driven from the community at gunpoint. Their Catholic relatives took over their lands, their animals, all their possessions. To ensure a complete break, they burned the houses of the non-Catholics.

While the expulsions were horrific for “los expulsados,” they provided an opportunity for the Centro Bíblico in Huajuapán to extend its influence. Hermano Heriberto helped the expelled groups to find land on the outskirts of the city, and also helped them build houses. Eventually, three communities of expelled Evangelicals established themselves in religious communities in Huajuapán de León. Each of these communities consists of a church building surrounded by the houses of the church members. In this way, the original Centro Bíblico became Centros Bíblicos.

In 1992 Mexican President Carlos Salinas de Gortari instituted a process whereby the national government came to recognize the existence of religious entities in the country. The federal constitution was changed as part of a modernization process that was aimed at renouncing the revolutionary radicalism of the 1917 constitution (Blancarte 1993:803). The changes allowed for the recognition of religious associations by the federal government. Although the main aim of the government was to recognize the Catholic Church, non-Catholic churches took advantage of the change to register themselves with the Ministry of the Interior (Blancarte 1993:784). The intent of the government was to create “a new legal framework for all churches founded on the principles of the separation of church and state, respect for religious freedom, and the maintenance of secular education in the public schools” (Blancarte 1993:786). The changes in the constitution allowed religious teaching in private schools and public worship outside church buildings; churches were also allowed to own property. At the same time, political activities and ownership of mass media by members of the clergy remain banned. It is also still illegal to hold political events in church buildings. Blancarte (1993:803) points out that

The legislation which established equality under the law for “religious associations” through registration with the Interior Ministry granted a new social status for the minority religious groups. This . . . has allowed minority groups to emerge from their relative segregation and develop their activities more openly and more effectively.

One such organization was the Centros Bíblicos of Huajuapán. The church registered as an Asociación Religiosa in 1993. Centros Bíblicos also registered the

congregations of expelled villagers with the government, thus giving them a legal status. In some cases, the non-Catholics who have formed congregations in other villages, without being expelled, have also registered through Centros Bíblicos. Centros Bíblicos is a very inclusive organization that welcomes members from any denomination that is Pentecostal.

TRINITARIANS AND THE ONENESS DOCTRINE

During the early days of the Pentecostal movement, one of the many diverging groups established the doctrine of baptism in the name of Jesus Christ rather than in the name of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The reason for this distinction is that, according to the Acts of the Apostles, when the Apostles began baptizing people, they did so in the name of Jesus Christ. The doctrine is explained as “Dios es Uno,” God is One, and has come to be called the oneness doctrine, or the Jesus’ name movement (Gill 1994:13–42). This doctrine divides a small number of denominations from the rest of the Pentecostals, who continue to baptize in the name of the Trinity. Hence the name Trinitarians. In the Bible, Jesus was baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although the Centros Bíblicos baptize in the name of the Trinity, people who were baptized in the name of Jesus Christ are welcomed into the group. This inclusiveness of the Centros Bíblicos is a characteristic that suits the religious landscape of the Mixteca region. In the communities where I worked, some of the non-Catholic churches were part of the Centros Bíblicos. Other churches included the Iglesia de Jesucristo de Las Américas, an assortment of Trinitarian religious groups, and the Seventh-day Adventists.

THE IGLESIA DE JESUCRISTO DE LAS AMÉRICAS

The Iglesia de Jesucristo de las Américas was established in 1971 by Efraím Valverde, previously a bishop of the Apostolic Assembly of the Faith in Christ Jesus (Valverde 2002:196). Pastor Valverde had been an important bishop in the Apostolic Assembly but had serious disagreements with other members of the church. He officially registered the new church in Sacramento, California. The most important characteristic of this church—and the source of the conflict between Hermano Valverde and the Apostolic Assembly—is its almost complete lack of structure. The Iglesia de Jesucristo de las Américas is the least structured church organization I have ever encountered. There are no bishops, no board of directors, no organizations of members into different societies—indeed, no pastors, in the common sense of the word. A new congregation is typically formed by members of an existing congregation. The new congregation acquires a pastor by a process of emergence: the person best qualified, in spiritual

terms, to lead the group becomes the pastor. In order to deal with secular authorities, secular entities are established. These secular entities have no actual power within the church itself; they only represent it to the formal, political world.

Carlos and Herminio Cruz and Lorenzo Mendoza Cervantes founded what might be called the Mixtec wing of the Iglesia de Jesucristo de las Américas (IJA) in 1978, seven years after the IJA was established by Hermano Valverde. All three were baptized in Vista, California, in an Iglesia de Jesucristo church. They immediately returned to the Mixteca region, to their respective villages. They were greeted with rejection and threatened with expulsion. They moved to the city of Juchitán, where they built a community of church members with a church in the center. As converts in other villages in the same distrito were expelled, they joined the Juchitán congregation.

The IJA is less inclusive than the Centros Bíblicos in that in order to belong, members must be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. The IJA has rules beyond the minimal for Pentecostals. Women members do not wear trousers; they wear long skirts and do not cut their hair. The members wear no jewelry, not even wedding rings. The members of this church have established numerous congregations in the Mixteca region and are now in the process of establishing congregations in every community to which Mixtecs migrate. While the Centros Bíblicos operate only in the Mixteca region, primarily in the distrito of Huajuapam de León, the IJA is a transnational organization. The largest congregation in Mexico is in Juchitán, but many villages have their own congregations. Two of the villages where I worked in the Mixteca have congregations, and there are congregations in the Sinaloa and Sonora communities where Mixtecs live. There are also substantial congregations in all the communities in the valley of San Quintín, Baja California. The largest number of members in the United States is in Santa Maria, California, but there are also congregations in many of the migrant destinations in the US. The church leaders say there are 10,000 to 15,000 Mixtec members; some are in Mexico and others are in the United States.

THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTISTS

Whatever their differences, the churches in the previous discussion are all Pentecostal, and were founded by Mexicans. The pastors are free to choose any topic for preaching on any day. Often, there are two or more speakers at each service, and they too speak on topics of their own choice. The Seventh-day Adventists, however, all study and preach on the same topic on any given day. These topics are selected by the church leadership in the US. The Adventists recognize the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the process of conversion and in the gift of prophesy, but they do not

recognize speaking in tongues as baptism of the Holy Spirit. Beyond abstinence from alcohol and tobacco, the Adventists abstain from pork and shellfish as well as all the animals prohibited in the biblical book of Leviticus 11.

While the other non-Catholic churches in the villages where I worked were founded in 1975 or later, the Adventist church was founded in the middle of the nineteenth century, in Battle Creek, Michigan. It has congregations throughout the world. Its organization is hierarchical, beginning with the world headquarters in the United States and ending with the *mayordomos encargados* at the level of the community.

In the Mixteca region, there are three congregations of Adventists. The largest is in the village of San Miguel Monteverde. Here, there are over 200 members. Santiago Asunción is the second largest, and San Juan Diquiyú is the smallest, consisting of an extended family. This congregation is discussed in chapter 4.

THE RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TO RELIGIOUS CHANGE

One reason for the success of the non-Catholics is the shortage of Catholic priests. Latin America has a much larger Catholic-to-priest ratio than anywhere else in the world (Hoge 2005:3); until recently, this situation has been accepted as a given. Most Latin American Catholics “have evolved a family-based or home-based Catholicism . . . taught by mothers and grandmothers in the home” (Hoge 2005:7). In other words, most Latin Americans are folk-Catholics who do not expect to participate as fully in the Catholic liturgy as do people in the United States. Thus, there has not been a perception of a lack of priests.

Until the influx of non-Catholics, this was true of the Mixteca region. However, now the Catholics point to the absence of priests as a cause for the increasing popularity of the non-Catholic religions. In Mixtec villages, the non-Catholics have several services every week, but the Catholic priests generally only visit during the fiestas. Because there is no one to say Mass on Sunday, the number of weekly Catholic ceremonies in the *agencias* is low. The majority of Catholic clergy live in the larger villages and towns of the region and they minister mainly to non-Indians.

One issue that I noticed in my fieldwork is the difference between the hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church and the more egalitarian organization of the non-Catholic denominations. While the Catholic priests live in the larger towns, the non-Catholic pastors live in the *agencias*, where they are literally part of the community. The Catholic priests call members of their flocks “*hijo* (son)” and “*hija* (daughter),” while all members of the non-Catholic congregations (including the pastors) call each other “*hermano* (brother)” and “*hermana* (sister).” The combination of a lack of priestly presence and the more egalitarian relationships of non-Catholics was cited to me by Catholic villagers as one cause of the increase in non-Catholics.

In general, the Catholic Church has instituted practices to deal with the increase in non-Catholics. Given the lack of clergy, there is much greater participation of the laity in Catholic Church activities than previously. In some parts of Latin America, there has been a new vitality in the participation of lay people in church activities. This has been, in part, a response to the challenge of non-Catholic proselytism. This is true to some extent in the Mixteca region also.

According to one of the two priests in charge of the municipio of San Juan Mixtepec, there are now two priests instead of one to minister to the thirty-six communities. He also notes that there are more lay pastoral agents than before the non-Catholics began returning to the villages. However, he did not say that the reason people are converting is the shortage of priests. His explanations for the conversions include the weakness of the faith of the Mixtepecos, the language problem (he does not speak Mixteco), the continuity of folk beliefs, the fact that the Catholics do not understand the Gospel, and the fact that non-Catholics evangelize strongly, and they don't respect the priests. According to him, the reason for conversions has nothing to do with the lack of priests or their attitude toward their congregants. This view helps to perpetuate that attitude.

One goal of the Mixtepec priest is to convince the people that San Juan Bautista (the patron saint of Mixtepec) is not the most spiritual entity: Jesus is more important. In other words, he would like the Catholics to give less emphasis to the fiestas, which are folk-Catholic events, and become more orthodox. One way of fostering this is that there are now many more catechism classes required in preparation for first communion, confirmation, and marriage. During these classes, the priests discuss Protestantism as a historical process of protest against the Catholic Church. For a young person to receive first communion or be confirmed, he or she must attend these weekly classes. Couples who want to be married in the church must have received first communion and been confirmed. In this way, the clergy is forcing orthodoxy on a folk culture. The increase in the number of non-Catholics in spite of these policy changes indicates that perhaps the clergy are unaware of the reasons for this conversion, as explained by Catholics in the villages.

CONCLUSION

Mixtecs are involved in a remarkable process of reinventing themselves. An important part of this process, and an important cause of it, is a proliferation of choices available to individuals. While the traditional patterns of social organization at the village level continue to be found, there are now alternate patterns that are developing in the villages. These new behaviors are direct outcomes of migration. One

choice being made is to convert to non-Catholic religions. The decision to convert is made by individuals, but it has impacts on families and entire communities in the homeland. This chapter has described some of the processes involved in this choice.

Migration itself is the aspect of globalization that has impacted Mixtecs the most. The bewildering array of possible activities confronted by the Mixtec migrants are also a factor of globalization. Although globalization presumes that all participants are modern, there are many parts of the lives of Mixtecs which are decidedly not. Are they inexorably moving toward modernity, or are there choices they can make to preserve their culture and selectively choose the elements of modernity that they like? Is there more than one kind of modernity? These questions are considered in the next chapter.

NOTES

1. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía (INEGI), the Mexican census, in 2000 characterized the Mixteca region as receiving among the highest rainfall totals in Mexico.

2. For a discussion of this matter, see Eisenstadt 2007.

3. Cancian (1965) contains the classic descriptions of the Mesoamerican fiesta system. For the fiesta system in the Mixteca, see Monaghan 1995.

4. All of the churches I studied in this project are Evangelical. Most do not recognize or accept the term *Protestant* for their groups. Given the increasing religious diversity in Latin America, the term *non-Catholic* is the broadest and hence the most inclusive.

5. Many Catholics believe that the reason people convert to other religions is that the evangélicos pay them or give them food so that they will convert. In reality, the original offers of food that sometimes accompany proselytizing are usually one time only. As people participate more in the life of the congregation, they are expected to contribute money, food, and/or labor to the group. Those who have no interest other than in what they can get out of the church are quickly disappointed.

6. *Compadrazgo* is the relationship between a person's parents and godparents. This is very close to a kinship tie; it is sometimes called fictive kinship. *Compadrazgo* ties tend to expand an individual's social networks and the number of people one can depend on for help.

7. It could be said that Catholics might also derive a sense of well-being from participating in Catholic rituals. However, folk-Catholic rituals do not have the same emphasis on heaven or on the second coming of Jesus. Rather, they are a means of expressing and continuing social relations in the village. These, in and of themselves, may lead to a feeling of well-being but evidently not for those who eventually convert to Evangelical religions.