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Indigenous Wisdom for Reconciliation of the Self: Re-Narrating Mexican Identity

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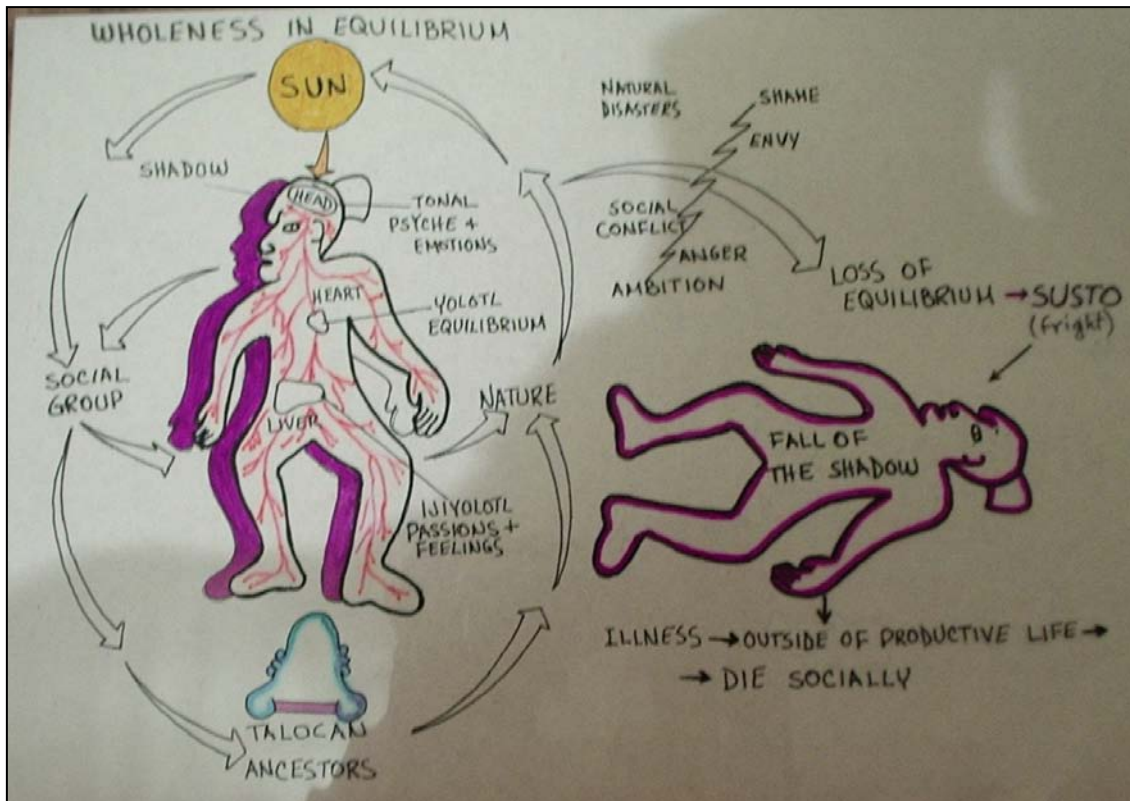
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Abstract

In all colonial histories relationships between Indigenous peoples and the rest of society have been characterised by violence, discrimination, political exclusion and the marginalisation of Indigenous cultures from being integral to social identity. In Mexico the denial of Indigenous cultures as constitutive of the Mexican self has produced a fragmented identity which lacks integrity and pride, inhibiting growth and creativity in Mexican multiculturalism. In this paper I reflect on the symbolic meaning of the movement for reconciliation in Australia in contrast with the Mexican situation, to bring out alternative strategies for reconciliation implicit in Indigenous practices in Mexico. Using Mexican Indigenous cultural practices as metaphors for symbolic healing I explore two instances of Mexican Indigenous wisdom: the healing practices of Indigenous peoples today and the discourse of the Zapatistas, an Indigenous army fighting for peace and social, political and cultural rights. I propose using the Indian model for healing as a form of narrative therapy for healing the Mexican self. Re-narrating Mexican identity as a process of healing by symbols and words reminds Mexicans who we are and makes it possible to achieve reconciliation, which in the case of Mexican society can be interpreted as self-reconciliation.

Keywords: Indigenous Healing, Symbols, Narrative Therapy, Self, Identity



Indigenous Cosmovision: Healing Oneness through Equilibrium

Introduction

Interethnic relationships between indigenous and mestizo Mexicans have been characterised by violence, discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation of indigenous peoples, with the consequent denial of their culture as an integral part of the Mexican self. Whether deliberate or unconscious, this exclusion has produced identities which lack integrity and pride. Consequently, Mexican identities represent a problematic ground in which contradictory meanings are played out. Sometimes we Mestizo Mexicans recognise our Indianness, at other times we reject it, engendering social and cultural distance, conflict and resentment.

After recognising that Mexican identities are problematic in these ways, I would like to point to some impacts of the enactment of contradictory hegemonic ideologies in which I was socialised. Hegemonic ideologies have historically claimed (through official policies and discourses, through education and symbolic cultural representations) that Mexicans are proudly Mestizos (a mix of Indian and Spanish peoples), but simultaneously separated from indigenous Mexicans, who have their own specific ethnicities and cultures. In my view, Mexican society has been locked in this incongruity, reproducing stigmatised identities with negative impacts on the social dynamics of Mexico. In this paper this is what I call a broken identity, which is 'sick' and needs to be healed.

While I was personally engaged with issues of interculturality and tensions over national identities, and reflecting on my own identity as a Mexican and new Australian,

Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper 1.2

Gabriela Coronado (2010) 'Indigenous Wisdom for Reconciliation of the Self: Re-Narrating Mexican Identity'.

I found it important to listen to indigenous voices from Australia, who have been exposed to the similar ideological pressures but with worse consequences. By being open to those voices I could see ways of reconstituting the broken identities that result from colonial processes, and identify strategies for healing the Mexican self, my own self as *mestiza* (of mixed heritage, as are most Mexicans).

In this paper I reflect on three aspects of indigenous wisdom which resonated with my need for reconstitution of my identity. Using these aspects as metaphors for symbolic healing I explore the value of reconciliation for indigenous Australians, which allows me to compare their situation with the Mexican situation, and challenge my assumptions. I then identify two instances of indigenous wisdom in Mexico: the healing practices of indigenous people today and the discourse of the Zapatistas, an indigenous armed movement fighting for their rights. In both instances, symbols and the power of the word are used to remind us who we Mexicans are, making it possible to achieve reconciliation, which for Mexican society needs to be interpreted as self-reconciliation.

Drawing on my own search to heal this 'sickness', I propose an alternative narrative, as a form of symbolic therapy. The ideas of narrative therapy, proposed by Michael White, inform my proposal. The narrative therapy approach involves questioning the 'truth' of dominant narratives about events with the aim to move out of 'dead ended' accounts into narratives that can provide personal emancipation (White, 1997). What better way to question dominant narratives than the accounts which come from counter power positions? In attempting to heal my Mexican identity this article uses a form of narrative therapy, inspired by indigenous approaches to health and disease, and their struggle for social justice.

The Contradictions of Mexican Indianness

As mentioned before the role of indigenous peoples in Mexican identity is controversial. There are ambiguities and contradictions which justify the claim that Mexican identity is schizophrenic (Montemayor, 1997). Mestizo Mexicans move between pride and recognition of their indigenous heritage and denying and despising it. The term *indio* (Indian) is sometimes used to refer to indigenous people, and at other times *indígena* (Indigenous). Both terms and meanings have changed historically (Reissner, 1983). The term *indio* has been used pejoratively by the dominant Mestizos, and also by Indian people to challenge the patronising, politically correct use of 'indigenous' in government institutions and policies. Indigenous people are typically represented by hegemonic discourses implicitly (and sometimes overtly) as minors, inferior, not capable of self-determination (Carbó, 1995).

In terms of the focus of this article, I prefer to use the word Indian when referring to indigenous Mexican peoples, precisely because the term represents the complex processes of denial and acceptance underlying the history of social injustice. It is this ambiguity that we need to fight against, in order to bring together both sides, cultures, histories and groups, into our identity.

Throughout the history of intercultural exchanges between the diverse constitutive groups the relevance of Indian culture as an important part of Mexican society and cultural identity has been minimised or denied (Coronado, 2003). Indians have been

considered a problem to solve, not a resource to enrich society. The potential unity of different indigenous and non indigenous groups was jeopardised by the process of colonialism and neo-colonialism, with its exercise and abuse of power leading to social fragmentation between groups which otherwise would be able to interact with each other within a broad common cultural, social and political system. Denial of Indianness as part of the identity of Mexicans can be regarded as a fragmentation conducive to identities that lack integrity and pride in their Indian self. This stigma embedded into the identity of Mexicans (Indians and Mestizos) has inhibited the collaboration and creativity which are so important in contemporary life.

My Personal Journey for Reconciliation

I should stress at this point that I am no stranger to the sickness of Mexican identity. I was socialised within ideologies which construct a sharply differentiated relationship between Mexican 'Mestizos', literally a mix (of Spanish and Indian), and Mexican Indians. We share the same ancestors, and then suddenly by a 'magic leap' we are not related. Most Mexicans can be called Mestizos, but a trick is played with the term, changing it to mean non-Indian. I am a *mestiza*, with definite though unknown Indian ancestors, whom my family have never mentioned, and with an appearance that could be interpreted as pure Spanish. Along with most Mestizos, I was brought up in ignorance and denial of my indigenous roots, and I did not live the culture and experience the poverty which is associated with the condition of many Mexican Indians.

This gives my argument its own biases, as I express some interests and experiences, but am excluded from others. This means that I cannot speak on behalf of all Mexicans, and nor do I intend to. That is a limitation, but a limitation shared by all Mexicans, indigenous and non indigenous alike. Even though at some points I do make some generalisations, it is important to recognise the complexity and diversity of interethnic experience and the multiplicity of responses to hegemonic discourses, between Indian-Mestizos and within each sector. Recognising and reflecting on this diversity I have made great efforts to listen to indigenous peoples, to communicate to others what has been meaningful for me in understanding my own self.

Coming to Australia I was struck and confronted by the politics of intercultural relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. Even though there are some common aspects arising from the colonial histories of both countries, such as discrimination, racism and social injustice (Vasta and Castle, 1996), there are differences that exposed some of my internalised ideological assumptions about national identities and intercultural politics. Through reflection I discovered that my interest in indigenous cultures was driven not only by intellectual curiosity and social consciousness, but also by the need to understand my identity as a Mexican. It became important to understand how we as a mestizo society have forgotten, or pretend to forget, Indian wisdom and how it has impacted on who we are and have been. Allowing for different contexts, I believe this is also the case for Australian society.

Of significance in these reflections was the symbolic value of the political process of reconciliation in Australia, and in particular the importance given to a public apology by the government and society. I had the opportunity to be part of important moments of Reconciliation, such as the 'Corroboree 2000' walk across Sydney Harbour Bridge,

Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper 1.2

Gabriela Coronado (2010) 'Indigenous Wisdom for Reconciliation of the Self: Re-Narrating Mexican Identity'.

in which thousands of non-indigenous Australians demonstrated against the refusal of the then government to say sorry to the Indigenous peoples, and in particular to the now-called 'stolen generations', i.e. the children forcibly removed from their families under assimilation policy. Many years later, in 2008, I shared the joy of many Australians when the new Labor prime minister, Kevin Rudd, said sorry to the descendents of the displaced Aboriginal Australians:

We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians. We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country. For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry. To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry. And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry. We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation (Rudd, 2008).

I was moved by these words, but was still intrigued and somewhat suspicious about the potential that reconciliation has for postcolonial societies, in which relations of power and interethnic conflict have shaped so many aspects of social, ideological, political and economic life. My reflection on the reconciliation phenomena in Australia, which I juxtaposed to Mexican social and political dynamics, marked my first step in the process of searching for alternative ways to re-narrate unity and healing, first of my identity, and then in a proposal for a form of national reconciliation for Mexico, a 'Reconciliation which opens up whole new possibilities for the future' (Rudd, 2008). I also believe this proposal provides points of reflection for an Australian reconciliation process that moves from symbols to actions.

Who is the Other to Reconcile With?

The word 'reconciliation' has become common in the context of political processes which address the destructive effects of colonial practices. Its use recognizes the need to repair the relationships between members of postcolonial societies, such as Australia. The Australian government represents reconciliation as being 'about unity and respect between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and non Indigenous Australians. It is about respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and valuing justice and equity to all Australians' (Australian Government Culture and Recreation Portal, 2009). From the 1967 referendum onwards, which led to citizenship status for Indigenous Australians, the reconciliation process has been an important part of the political process for equal rights and opportunities for Indigenous peoples (HREOC, 1997).

The word reconciliation has played a central role shaping the discourses used in the indigenous social and political movement. Reconciliation in the sense of 'unity and respect' evokes meanings that are significant for any society that has experienced a history of colonisation, which carries the destruction of social life and culture of indigenous peoples. However, the word can also be interpreted in different ways, depending on the particular political contexts and moments, and the conditions arising from the relevant colonial and postcolonial histories.

In Mexico the term has not been widely used to re-position and empower the sectors of society that were marginalised and exploited as a consequence of the colonisation process, and it is not in common use to represent indigenous social struggles as has been the case in other countries, as for the Australian Indigenous movement. One possible explanation I can suggest is that in the context of 500 years of different forms of domination, which included armed and ideological forms of repression, the word reconciliation (*reconciliación* in Spanish) evokes a religious, moralistic discourse controlled by the dominant religion in the country, the Catholic Church. This is evident in the dictionary definition of the word '*reconciliar*' (to reconcile), meaning 'to get back to your old friends or agree over divisive animus', 'to listen in brief and superficial confession' and 'to reach peace and friendship with God' (Raluy Poudevida, 1998: 636)¹.

Religious discourse in the hands of the Catholic Church has been a fundamental tool for hegemonic control since the Spanish conquest (Moreno Toscano, 1997). Through this association the word reconciliation carries a strong sense of official Catholicism, with connotations of surrender and forgiveness, but not necessarily a change of behaviour. To put indigenous demands in terms of this meaning, reconciliation could be associated with giving up, ending resistance, reproducing subordination mediated by ideological discourses of political hypocrisy or demagoguery. As a person socialised in Mexico's catholic society, I feel behind the word *reconciliación* a sharp dichotomy around forgiveness (from the 'victim') and repentance (of the 'perpetrator'). Besides reproducing a non-reciprocal process, in today's society this dichotomy is problematic. In the case of Australia the reconciliation process engaged the whole society, including myself as a recent Australian, but in Mexico after more than 500 years of interethnic interaction such a process needs to be constructed differently. In some ways everyone can be victim or perpetrator, some more than others.

Even though 'reconciliation' is not a key word for indigenous social movements in Mexico, owing to its history and connotations, it is important to consider other ways to respond to violence, exploitation, discrimination and racism in interethnic conflicts in contemporary society. Colonialism, as an initial condition in the development of Mexican society, destroyed the possibilities of collaborative relationships between different groups, generating a society characterised by fragmentation, self rejection and inequality between social sectors. To bring about a change in those conditions I argue there is a need to generate some kind of healing process, under whatever name.

From Self Denial to Self Reconciliation

Mechanisms of colonisation in Mexico destroyed the integrity of indigenous societies and still actively limit the capacity to rebuild an integrated nation. The process of interethnic confrontation and negotiation between Spanish and Mesoamerican Indian groups and their descendants has taken more than 500 years, still without resolution. Interethnic conflict is present in many regions with more or less violent and tragic results², and also in everyday interactions, even though many do not acknowledge it.

¹ This and all other translations from the Spanish original are mine.

² Among others, the work of Juan Briseño (1994a, 1994b) traces the historical struggle between Nahuatl peoples and Mestizo caciques in the region of his study.

The process of slow mixing of the Indian and Spanish populations created what it is called today in Spanish a *mestizo* society, a word whose dictionary definition is 'child born from parents of different race' and 'especially the child of white and indian or indian and white' (Raluy Poudevida, 1998: 480).

Today the word *mestizo* paradoxically is commonly used to refer to the dominant Spanish-speaking groups who did not recognise the Indian part of their identity. The denial of one part of the mix in the meaning of the word can be seen as indicative of the way Mexicans Mestizos deal with the dilemma of their Indianness, a complex social situation that has been characterised as pathological. Mestizos' identity is in permanent turmoil, as Mestizos try to deal with the contradiction of being Indian (in the mix) while denying their Indianness. Indians seem to be acceptable as part of an imagined identity that connects contemporary Mexican society with ancient high civilisations, but simultaneously mestizo Mexicans discriminate against and reject contemporary Indians who live in rural communities in high levels of poverty and marginalisation, still speaking their languages and maintaining practices derived from colonial developments of Mesoamerican culture. Racially they might look alike even though Mestizos do not now regard themselves as Indians (for a more in-depth study of this contradiction, see Coronado, 2003).

In general, the close affinity between Mestizos and contemporary Indian peoples is not recognised, or if it is accepted it comes with a trace of shame³. In the ideological discourse produced by post-revolutionary nationalists, the term *mestizo* was used to represent Mexican Identity as '*la raza de bronce*' (the race of bronze), or as José Vasconcelos (1997[1925]) called it 'the cosmic race', in which the best qualities of different races were mixed to produce the distinctive, unique character of Iberoamerican people (see also Bartra, 2002).

In everyday language in everyday life however, Mexicans do not see themselves as Mestizos, and ignore the Indian part of their identity. This active amnesia is manifested in the functional meaning of the term *mestizo*. When the word is used to characterise the identity of someone, especially in regions with a large Indian population, it effectively means non-Indian, or as commonly people say '*gente de razón*' (people who think). This is another identity term in which denial of the self acts as a process of discrimination against the other, and in fact of one's own self. In this way the identity of Mestizos, most Mexicans⁴, is actively the negation of one part of the whole identity, creating what I claim is a fragmented self, a 'sick' identity.

The disease I sense in Mexican identity comes from the deep divide, in society and in Mestizos' inner selves, which was created through the conquest and has been reproduced until today. This divide produces effects in the kind of social relationships

³ I base this assertion in my own experience in Mexico, especially during my inquiry about the meaning of Mestizo identity for contemporary Mexicans. Of course my research is not exhaustive.

⁴ I claim this includes most Mexicans, but there is no way to prove this, given that criteria of identity are easily manipulated. For census statistics, the markers of Indian identity have changed from using *huaraches* (an Indian style of sandal) to the stricter criterion of speaking an Indian language. In an act of statistical ethnocide, by another 'magic loop' the mestizo population reduced from 60% in the 1921 census to apparently disappearing from later censuses. Now, only those who declare they speak an indigenous language are considered Indian. Conversely, all Spanish speaking Mexicans are considered the same, irrespective of their Indian, Mestizo or European origins (See Valdés, 1995).

between groups which have normalised a social system based on the domination of Indians by powerful sectors of Mexican society. In Indigenous regions these are generally ‘Mestizos/non-Indian’ caciques (local political bosses) who consider themselves superior, based on an ideology that legitimises their power by constructing Indian peoples as subordinated to them.

Many Mestizos who are not in positions of power have tried to protect themselves from exclusion and discrimination by systematically concealing their Indianness, becoming actively racist⁵ in the process. The act of self-rejection, including a kind of skin colour blindness, reproduced over many generations, has made it easy for we Mestizos to forget our Indian roots, and thus to ignore our close kinship to contemporary Indians. To have links with great civilisations such as the Maya or Aztec is welcomed. They can be part of our inheritance. But then we exclude their other heirs, contemporary Indian peoples.

This lack of recognition of the Indianness of most Mexicans has produced a problem: by negating one part of their self, individuals negate the creativity that comes from the cultural richness of their diverse cultural backgrounds. Following the work of Erving Goffman, I consider that this process conduces to the emergence of a stigmatised identity (Goffman, 1973), which often gives rise to dysfunctionality and even paralysis, produced by shame of their deep self – the Indian part – that is there but despised, rejected, hidden, and forgotten. The other problem is the social effect of this stigma, which generates a distance between groups that otherwise would be united by shared cultural and social conditions. It blocks the capacity to be part of the group to which individuals actually belong.

Indian peoples have experienced systematic marginalisation that far from being reduced by the racial and cultural mixing, and all the combined contributions towards developing the nation, has increased exploitation and exclusion for those sectors who carry the “burden” of their ethnicity, which in this case becomes an Otherness (Said, 1978). The effect of that marginalisation is visible in urbanised sectors, who a few generations ago were indigenous or mestizo peasants, and now actively try to conceal their Indianness. As an effect of systematic discrimination, those considered Indian or closer to Indians have in many cases internalised and accepted this exclusion as legitimate, losing their sense of self-respect. An example of this is the common refusal to speak their indigenous language, even if the underlying traces of their mother tongue betray them. Denial of speaking a language does not necessary means self rejection. It can also be used as a political strategy in interethnic contexts. However, even in those cases it indicates the context is one in which to be Indian is regarded as unacceptable.

In this situation it is clear to me that in their national culture and identity Mexicans need to transform the negative relationships between the social groups to be able to confront the new conditions of the contemporary world. Contemporary conditions demand more than ever societies which bring together different peoples, cultures and resources. I see the unity in diversity that all postcolonial societies have as a potentially powerful force, to resist the global neocolonial pressures toward homogenisation, and enhance their emerging multicultural oneness, by recognising the multiple cultural

⁵ See Coronado (2003) for a discussion of examples of racism implicit in discourse produced by people who can be regarded as close to Indian Mestizos.

resources which are integral to every culture and hence all identities (For the Australian case of multicultural culture, see Hodge & O'Carroll, 2006).

An important part of the Indian presence in Mexican society is invisible to the Mestizo consciousness, but is still present in a collective knowledge around forms of healing that are important for Mexican people, not only in regions with Indian majorities but in many other sectors, rural and urban (Coronado, 2005). I have been exposed throughout my life to these practices, with specialist healers and in my everyday life, taking popular remedies from knowledge carried by my grandmothers.

The Unity of the Self: Body, Soul, Community and Nature

The Indian model of health and disease contains and reproduces the complex worldview of Indian culture. This way of making sense of the world offers forms of understanding and healing of what I have called the stigmatised identity of Mexicans, the fragmentation of the Mexican self.

Although it is impossible to do justice to the complexity and historical depth of the Indian worldview I will present here a synthesis of some of the basic principles of the Indian model of health. This synthesis is based on the healing practices of Central Mexico, with particular reference to the Nahua population, but are also shared by other Mesoamerican groups (among others I consulted Aramoni Burguete, 1990; López Austin, 1980, 1994; Lupo, 1995; Poury-Toumi, 1996; Serge, 1987). I use those principles as the basis for my proposal for reconciliation with ourselves⁶.

In the Nahua cosmology the human body is conceptualised as the axis or tree of life (Signorini & Lupo, 1989), which as a whole is constituted by three elements that are integrated sources for human life. In the illustration 'Indigenous Cosmivision: Healing Oneness through Equilibrium' at the beginning of this paper I included my representation of this cultural view. One element is the *tonal* (in Nahuatl, but also used in Spanish), the energy that comes from the sun and enters the body through the head. It represents psychic and emotional activity, and its force is carried in the blood to give life to the whole body. The second is the *ijiyotl*, located in the liver, containing the passions and feelings. These two elements are linked to the *yolotl*, situated in the heart, whose function is to keep the whole in equilibrium. Its strength is distributed throughout the body and defines its form. The energy of the body (*tonal*) is visible to human eyes in the shadow (*sombra*).

The idea of the integration of all elements is a very important principle in Mexican Indian cosmology, and goes beyond the scope of the individual body. It includes the interdependent relationships between human beings and between them and nature (plants, animals, earth, water, sun, winds and all the spirits who own and care for them). The three elements, *tonal*, *ijiyotl* and *yolotl*, are reciprocally connected and at the same time related to the surrounding world, linking biological and psychic bodies with social and cosmic forces. The equilibrium of the self as a whole is essential to maintain the wellbeing of the individual, the community and the natural environment.

⁶ Discussions of these principles were included in earlier works for different arguments. See Coronado, 2003 and 2005.

In this holistic framework, the body is exposed to a loss of equilibrium when one part of the self is damaged.

Applying this view to refer to the Mexican identity it can be said that the integrity of the Mexican self was affected by external turbulence coming from historical events. I see colonisation as beginning of the interethnic construction of the contemporary Mexican stigmatised identity. In the same way as emotions, social conflicts or natural disasters, and also actions of individuals, (which express conflicts from negative feelings such as envy, ambition, jealousy or anger) impact on the health of people, they also impact on the dynamics of social interaction and consequently on the construction of social identities, such as the Mexican one.

When the balance of all the elements of the self is lost people get ill, and it is said they have *susto* (fright), which means that their *sombra* (shadow), the energy of the body, 'falls down'. Being sick they cannot fulfil their roles within the family and community, so they stay outside the productive cycle and socially may die. With the 'social death' of a member of the collective the inner equilibrium of the group, its integrity, is broken and so is the cycle of social productive life (Aramoni Burguete, 1995: 79). This is represented as a social illness but affects the biological health of the individual.

In Indigenous views, to reconstitute the equilibrium it is necessary to balance the dual elements that exist in nature, which are contradictory but part of the same process. Healing treatments work by manipulating the interactions among opposite elements as a way to restore the balance in the body. Especially relevant for Mexican Indians is the balance of hot and cold. Some have attributed this belief to the influence of European classical theories of humoral medicine, brought by Spanish to the New World. It is difficult to know what elements of the contemporary Indian culture were brought or existed before the conquest. However, what is important to recognise here is the integrity of the thermal symbolism into the indigenous cosmology which goes beyond the classic theories of humoral medicine (Classen, 1993).

In order to respond to traumatic events which break the harmony of the individual and social body, Mexican Indian peoples created a healing system named *curanderismo*. In similar ways as Australian Indigenous rituals and symbolism are now integrated into the reconciliation process, the healing model of *curanderismo* relies strongly on the power of symbols, including ritual objects, actions and words. It can be said that both Mexican *curanderismo* and Indigenous Australian rituals are semiotic practices which try to heal diseases, restore personal equilibrium, and reconstitute communal integrity through managing meanings. The Mexican indigenous specialists who control this symbolic system are the *curanderos*, the healers. Outside the healing process, the elders are the ones who manage symbols for religious, social or political processes. This is also the case in Australian Aboriginal groups.

Healers have received from relatives or mentors the gift to 'see', 'know' and 'communicate' with the ancestors and the divinities. They also learn the qualities of the elements needed to restore the lost harmony, which include a complex knowledge of the healing properties of plants. Parallel to the pharmacological effects of medicinal plants, the symbolic system deployed in therapeutic practices uses communication in dreams and prayers to invoke the beings who live in the underworld, in *Talokan*, the

sacred mountain, where *curanderos* go in dreams to find the *tonal*, the shadow of the sick person, which fell down and got lost.

The prayers which accompany the healing rituals, named *la limpia* (the cleansing), are classified according to the dual qualities, hot or cold, and are the means to reach the sacred mountain, *Talokan*, asking the ancestors for the place where the shadow of the sick person fell down. In this way the *curanderos* try to restore harmony to social relationships, healing people to bring them back into the collective dynamic, simultaneously reinforcing the healing process by involving the other members of the group. The healers not only heal bodies but also restore society, which includes nature and supernatural beings, as well as humans (Briseño, 1994b).

Relevant to the argument in this paper, Aramoni and Serge interpret *curanderismo* as a cultural strategy to resist the destruction of Mesoamerican society during the colonial period, and later the impacts on Indians of the conflictive interethnic relationships in Mexican society that have continued until today. In this interpretation, the equilibrium of Indian society was broken by the negative effects of an interethnic interaction based on domination of Indian peoples. Among their other strategies, Indians opposed that rupture, the loss of equilibrium, by recreating the cultural symbolic system that allowed them to comprehend and act against the effects of a social disruption which they could not reverse in other ways due to the superior force of the colonial power.

This process of healing, symbolically restoring the lost harmony, was managed alongside the transformation of their cultures into new forms of social and cultural behaviour. This included various forms of Indian resistance, depending on specific kinds of interaction in the new conditions of social life. Sometimes resistance took the form of active confrontation, while at other times it was expressed by pretended changes, concealing their traditional cultural practices or appropriating new practices and behaviours into their own cultural meanings (Bonfil, 1987a). In each case Indian groups activated resources from their own culture and social organisation to adapt to the new conditions.

Specific strategies for interethnic interaction reflected particular conditions of the confrontation but in general Indians were exposed for centuries to such levels of violence and abuse of power that models and techniques of healing were not enough to restore their collective integrity. Indians were pushed into systematic confrontation, which destroyed any chance of a 'peaceful', or at least less destructive, process of interethnic interaction. Some regions, including Chiapas, where the Zapatista outbreak occurred, were subjected from colonial times up to the present to such intensity of exploitation that Indians were driven at different times into a state of war against national and local governments (García de León, 1985).

Other regions experienced different conditions, in which there were some opportunities to develop some measure of control of their process of cultural transformation (Bonfil, 1987a, 1987b), though never without some level of open conflict and resistance (Reyna, 1980; Briseño, 1994a, 1994b; Coronado, 2003). Both types of situation generated responses reflecting deep basic principles arising from their cosmology, which are still alive in the culture of Indian peoples, and even, to some extent, in other sectors of Mexican society that are not regarded as Indian any more.

In this environment of instability the Indian health system was a useful basis from which to reproduce Indian culture, not as an updated tradition, but as a generative, dynamic force for continuity and transformation, which they called '*la costumbre*' (literally custom). *La costumbre* can be compared to concepts used by other indigenous peoples, such as 'the law' or 'dreaming' in Indigenous Australian cultures (Behrendt, 2003).

The process of healing, trying to restore balance to the situation produced by the two antagonistic forces, the Indian and Spanish civilisations, has not been sustained by all groups with an indigenous heritage. Only those who over the centuries maintained their Indian identity and the cultural practices at the core of their social reproduction continued to practise this healing system. The rest of society distanced themselves from their Indian roots, and acted against domination by self-rejection instead of resistance. These lost opportunities which Indian culture offers, and which embarrassed Mestizos deny.

By rejecting the value of Indian culture, these Mexicans also refused to acknowledge the need to reconcile the two constituents of their identity. Thus they lost their wellbeing, and the means to restore their wholeness of self by constructing a new integrated culture, a multicultural, with unity and diversity. The urgent need to reconstitute Mexican unity has been clearly identified by the Zapatista Army for National Liberation (*Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional*, EZLN), a political movement which declared war against the Mexican Army in 1994. The EZLN is constituted in its majority by Indians from the state of Chiapas, and some Mestizo collaborators.

The Nation's Roots and the Zapatista Call

In 1994, after the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) between Mexico, USA and Canada, the Zapatista Army (EZLN) declared war against the Mexican government. The insurrection was a protest against the historical reproduction of marginalisation of indigenous sectors, which has not been solved by independence, revolution or democratisation. But it was also triggered by the exacerbation of those conditions by national policies that the government put in place to accommodate to needs and demands from global capitalism, instead of promoting the wellbeing of Mexican people. The actions of this armed movement brought to public notice the shameful and intolerable conditions in which some sectors of population have lived for centuries, becoming slowly worse and worse, making them the poorest of the poor, and without hope (EZLN, 1994).

Irrespective of triumphs or defeats which critics or supporters point to⁷ the continuous struggle and intermittent public voice of the Zapatistas created a different ideological environment in Mexico around Indianness, sustained by the global support for the charismatic Sub-Commander Marcos, and by the evident legitimacy of indigenous demands (Castells, 2001). The Zapatistas reminded the whole nation that Indianness inheres not only in our distant past, not only in the groups that have resisted the

⁷ Among the many writings about the Zapatistas see le Bot (1997); Díaz Polanco (1997); Carr (1998) and the critique of Tello Díaz (1995).

violence exercised against their cultures and languages. Indianness is part of Mexican society and Mexican identities, whose integrity needs to be reconstituted. As they said:

We have fulfilled one of our missions: we reminded the nation what are our roots; the mask of a false prosperity was ripped off by brown hands and the ancient ways.

Una de nuestras misiones se ha cumplido: recordamos a la nación cuales eran sus raíces; la máscara de una prosperidad falsa fue arrancada por manos morenas y pasos antiguos (EZLN, 1995: 434).

To reach this goal the Zapatistas have used many different resources. They did use bullets, but mostly words. In their public communication they invented a rich new political discourse. In this discourse Mexican history is rewritten from the Indians' perspective (Coronado, 2002). I see this discourse as an act of therapeutic re-narration (Calderón de la Barca, 2007). This account gives fresh meanings to national heroes, and new sense to the Indian view of the world in a broader national context. By their use of oral traditions and descriptions of everyday life in rural communities the Zapatistas have reminded Mexicans that Indian cultural values and practices are alive not only among Indian peoples but in many other groups that do not identify themselves as Indians, but share similar values, culture and beliefs, and also social and economic marginalisation and political exclusion.

One aspect of their discursive style that has become important in the Zapatistas communication and which I borrow for my reflection on the healing of identities is the use of the words '*hermanos y hermanas*' (brothers and sisters). Zapatistas used this appellation to relate to groups that have been divided in the past by the effects of domination in old and new forms.

I interpret the use of the words *hermanos y hermanas* as a symbol of a political process that in the specific situation of Mexico can be understood as a kind of 'reconciliation'. In this case brothers and sisters used to be together, but domination divided them. As Mestizos become brothers and sisters of indigenous people, in this case rebels, the distinction between 'victims' and 'perpetrators' is dissolved. We all have been victims of the separation of our indigenous self by the effects of colonisation, but we have also been perpetrators against our oneness, and against other groups, whom we do not recognise as related because they seem more Indian. The purpose behind the use of the phrase *hermanos y hermanas* is to reconstitute unity among Mexicans who can be named brothers and sisters, not only because they share racial, class or cultural origins, but more importantly because they share dignity and the courage to reject the spurious legitimacy of governments and their allies and sponsors, who have betrayed the Mexican people. Independently of how the need of reconciliation emerged in each country (Mexico or Australia), an alliance between indigenous and non indigenous people is needed to bring together those who share the aim of achieving social justice, or in Australian symbolism 'a fair go'.

These terms were not used by the Zapatistas to communicate with the groups in government or dominant sectors of society. They did not ask for political reconciliation (in vertical terms), nor with groups that still insist on their 'foreignness', their 'whiteness'. Nor was it just a way to demand recognition for the injustices that Indian peoples have suffered. Rhetorical discourses recognising this injustice have been

around for too long without producing substantial changes in the position of Indian Peoples inside Mexican society, as is evident in the offensive gap between levels of poverty and marginalisation corresponding to indigenous versus non-indigenous status (INEGI, 2005).

The recognition of injustice against indigenous people by the Mexican government was even mobilised by that same government against the Zapatistas. Government representatives, (eg the Secretary of the Agrarian Reform, Arturo Warman) accused the leaders of the Zapatista movement of manipulating the just desires of indigenous people for better conditions of life, which they claimed to care about more genuinely than the Mestizos Zapatistas (see Hernández Castillo, 2001 and Tello Díaz, 1995). The choice of the indigenous revolutionary Emiliano Zapata from the 1910 Mexican Revolution (Silva Herzog, 1970; Cordoba, 1975) as the inspiration for the contemporary indigenous armed movement can be read as a strong statement about the continuing relevance of social injustice as justification for the struggle.

The importance of using the terms brothers and sisters is that they construct a brother/sisterhood as a horizontal network to bring together groups with different social conditions, political aims and cultural resources, which have been considered ethnically distinct, but which actually share in part the Indian culture.

The oldest of the elders advise then to watch where the sun walks to ask other brothers/sisters of race, of blood, of hope, where to walk our painful pain, our tired step... We open our heart, brothers/sisters. We learn to see and hear other brothers/sisters, who are different.

Los más viejos aconsejaron entonces mirar a donde el sol camina para preguntar a otros hermanos de raza, de sangre, de esperanza, por donde habría de andar nuestro dolor dolido, nuestro cansado paso... Abrimos nuestro corazón hermanos. Aprendimos a ver y escuchar a otros hermanos diferentes (EZLN, 1995: 274-275).

By building this network of relationships, creating unity among the different - the 'brothers/sisters who are different' - the Zapatistas proposed and fight for a unity that makes possible the healing of the Mexican self, reminding us what it means to be deeply Indian:

To be Indian is today to be worthy and true. It is not colour and language, to be Indian is to want to struggle and be better.

Ser indígena hoy es ser digno y verdadero. No es color y lengua, el ser indígena es la gana de luchar y ser mejores (EZLN, 1995: 308).

The chance to fight against injustice by constructing a true democracy, equality and justice, which is the main goal of the Zapatista movement, can only happen through recognition of this common aim:

We are nothing if we walk alone, we will be all if our steps walk beside other worthy steps.

Nada somos si solos caminamos, todo seremos si nuestros pasos caminan junto a otros pasos dignos (EZLN, 1994: 147).

Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper 1.2

Gabriela Coronado (2010) 'Indigenous Wisdom for Reconciliation of the Self: Re-Narrating Mexican Identity'.

The words of the Zapatistas have had an important effect on Mexican society in raising the awareness of many sectors about the indigenous presence in Mexican society. I believe this effect is just the beginning of a longer process that needs more understanding and pride in the knowledge of Indians in general, not only of the Zapatistas.

Re-Narrating Mexican Identity

Even though throughout history the Indian part of Mexican identity, its deep root, has been continuously hidden and denied, the rejected indigenous roots remain there as a fallen shadow, or in the terms proposed by Guillermo Bonfil (1987b) as '*México Profundo*' (Deep Mexico). It does not matter if we Mestizos do not see it or recognise its existence. It is still there in our unconscious. If we try to deny it, rejecting other Mexicans who have persisted in reproducing Indian culture, Mexican identity cannot flourish and reproduce. Indigenous peoples are the living memory of our denied self. We need to pick up our shadow and restore it to the unity of our identity.

As mentioned earlier, my intention here is to use a form of narrative therapy in which the process of recovering the unity of Mexican identity relies on the power of words and meanings, an important component of the indigenous healing model in Mexico and Australia. By looking at indigenous wisdom to heal my identity I am pleading for a new story, as a therapeutic tool to recover the dynamic effect of symbols and words, which persist in the everyday life of Indian communities, still used for healing by *curanderos* and *curanderas* in the country side and the cities. To re-narrate the story I listen to the words of the Zapatistas, also full of symbols and cultural meanings, which insistently appeal to all Mexicans. Through symbols and words they offer a language they regard as '*la palabra verdadera*' (the true word) in which they reiterate that our mestizo identity includes our indianness. They invite us to embrace our origins as a society without shame.

I found many points of relevance to my narrative therapy approach as I brought together the worldview of indigenous healing and the political discourse of the Zapatistas, as an alternative way of constructing a different kind of relationship between Indigenous and non-indigenous peoples in Mexico and in Australia. Through their discourse the Zapatistas used the power of the word to propose a different account of Mexican national identity based on unity among Mexicans. From their discourse I focused on their use of some terms which symbolise a new kind of interethnic relationship among the Mexican people, as brothers and sisters. Beyond their specific struggle against marginalisation and political exclusion as indigenous peoples the Zapatistas have invited all Mexicans to fight together with pride and dignity as brothers and sisters. This is my response to their invitation.

I want to emphasise and embrace the Zapatista strategy, using it as a new narrative for the healing of identities. They propose the construction of a new unity in Mexico by restoring meaning to words and national symbols which are common to all Mexicans but whose meanings have been corrupted by governmental discourses. One example is the Mexican flag, symbol of our common national identity. In their narrative the Zapatistas remind us that the flag, '*... in its centre declares without shame our Indian roots*' (*...en su centro declara sin rubor nuestras raíces indígenas*) (EZLN, 1995: 461).

Institute for Culture and Society Occasional Paper 1.2

Gabriela Coronado (2010) 'Indigenous Wisdom for Reconciliation of the Self: Re-Narrating Mexican Identity'.

By remembering the indigenous meanings which are present in our symbols of identity we can construct a new narrative to heal ourselves.

Conclusion

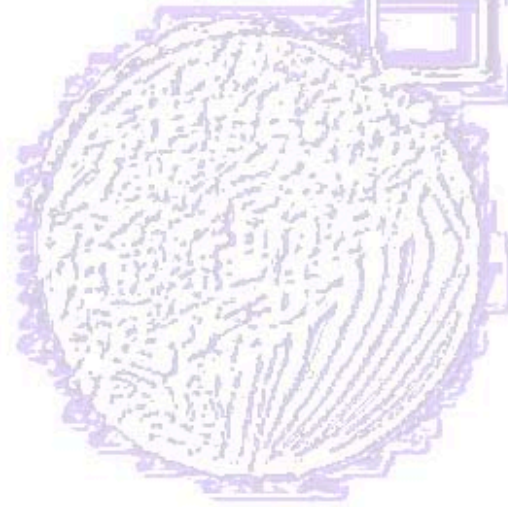
By listening to indigenous voices and applying their wisdom to understand the stigma of Mexican identities and its consequent dysfunctionality, it becomes evident that the unity of our culture broke when the Indian part of our self, our vital energy, our shadow, 'fell down'. The violence against indigenous Mexicans broke the equilibrium, destroyed the cycle of production, stopped the process of restoration of social life and destroyed the spaces for symbolic reproduction of society as a whole. Since colonisation the rupture has become deeper and deeper, and we Mexican Mestizos are frightened, we suffered *susto*. We lost the potential energy that flows from a harmonious interconnection with our social group and thence with nature. The pride of our unified self has been lost. Only by recovering the integrity of our wholeness through recognising our Indian roots could we Mexican Mestizos construct a new creative and productive identity.

Mexican unity, with all its contradictions, contains the *tonal*, the shadow, the vital energy, which stands up again to make us accept not only the privilege of being named brothers and sisters by Indians, but to be proud of our deep self that is Indian. This self-reconciliation is in my view the first, indispensable step to begin the construction of the society that Indians, Zapatistas and non Zapatistas, are demanding and all Mexicans need: a society that looks for and follows the Indian principles that are in our deep self, to restore the equilibrium broken by domination. Only in this way we can be part of the social productive cycle of life, and deal with the continuous conflicts and dilemmas that arise in any society by bringing together diversity and unity. Only in this way and by listening to our other voices will we be able to creatively use our multicultural culture. To conclude I will borrow the words that proclaimed the dream of the Zapatistas, as a therapeutic narrative for the Mexican self. I also would like to adapt this dream so that it can be embraced by all postcolonial societies to heal their interethnic conflicts and restore the integrity of their national identities. In particular, I would like it to be embraced by Australia, now part of my own multicultural-self:

One morning, after a long night of nightmare and pain THE MEXICO [AUSTRALIA] THAT WE WANT will dawn. Mexicans [Australians] will awake, without words they must silence, without masks to dress their grief. In our feet will be that unrelenting urgency to dance and in our hands the itch to shake friendly other hands. That day THE MEXICO [AUSTRALIA] THAT WE WANT will be a reality and not just a topic for colloquiums on dreams and utopias.

Una mañana, después de una noche larga de pesadilla y dolor amanecerá EL MÉXICO [AUSTRALIA] QUE QUEREMOS. Habrán de despertar los mexicanos [Australianos], sin palabras que callar, sin máscaras para vestir sus penas. Habrá en los pies esa inquieta urgencia de bailar y en las manos la comezón de estrechar amigas otras manos. Ese día EL MÉXICO [AUSTRALIA] QUE QUEREMOS será una realidad y no apenas un tema para coloquios de sueños y utopías (EZLN, 1995: 292).

That day all Mexicans will be proud to be Indian. That day all Mexicans and all Australians will be brothers and sisters of indigenous people, working together for a better future. That is my dream.



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