

## **Multi-Cultural into Question**

Adriana Gómez-Aíza, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, México  
Marina Alonso-Bolaños, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, México  
Odilón Moreno-Rangel, Universidad Autónoma del Estado de Hidalgo, México

### **Abstract**

As the planet goes global, the isolation of indigenous people in Mexico leaps out denying the benefits of an all-embracing modern society. This reminds us the relationship between social inequity with ethnic and language differences, and the reductionist recognition of cultural diversity that nourishes an antithetical insight of homogeneous social categories like Indian or non-Indian. Two examples serve here to discuss the logics of cross-culturalism. First, indigenous refugees and displaced communities in southern territories offer a paradigmatic case that opens a possibility to question the idea of fixed and permanent identities. Second, the bicultural educative project in central lands (i.e., teaching into two languages simultaneously – native and Spanish) shows further limitations of the discourse on cultural plurality. Both examples disclose an ethnocentric recognition of cultural difference owing to a linguistic understanding of identity, and underline the role of migration in the reconstruction of fragmented identities.

### **Multi-cultural Into Question**

In Mexico it is common to talk about cultural plurality and ethnic diversity, two concepts that implicitly denote the recognition of difference. Recognition implies a twofold possibility, either a positive and favourable reading of plurality and diversity after which care should be taken, or a negative and subduing approach within which cultural attributes efface. Today, acknowledgement of cultural difference is both a testimony of the country's richness and a token of its tolerant and democratic society. Not so long ago, however, the goal of cultural politics was to construct a unified society by means of an overall integration of different populations into the national project. The idea behind was that only a united country (i.e., cultural and racial homogeneity) could grant national strength and sovereignty.

Indigenous cultural traits, once a reminder of the past and burden of the country's development, suddenly became the source of cultural wealth. This discursive shift took place during the last thirty years, or so, in Mexico. Many are the potential answers that explain this shift, but it is not our interest to discuss them here. We rather focus on paradoxical cases that open up questions about the pertinence and congruity of such a discourse.

Cultural diversity is the outcome of age-old settlements of various cultures that were conquered and colonised by Spain at the dawn of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom mixed with conquerors afterwards. American countries share much of this condition, while Africa, Asia and the Middle East endure similar situations, as opposed to European countries where the concern for cultural diversity is a side effect of recent migration—which does not mean reducing the role of migration in the past. The difference between conquered and conquering

people, as it were, already accounts for a great variety of understandings of cultural plurality, interculturalism, multiculturalism, and cross-culturalism.

Certainly it is not only a matter of form, but content. However, this is not the place to offer ontological definitions, or clarifications of that sort. Whether one could argue on behalf of certain common values that enable or prevent communication cross-culturally, it is not that simple to compare the claims of autonomy by Basques and Catalans in Spain, with those of indigenous populations in ex-colonies like Mexico. Nor do we think it is feasible to compare migratory policies of countries like Canada, with those of Argentina, both with significant amounts of European immigrants other than Anglo-Saxon and Spaniards. The United States is a case on its own: a British ex-colony and country of immigrants, whose largest minority today has a Spanish speaking background—the so-called *Hispanos*, meant to represent a quarter of the US citizens by 2050 (Hussain, 2004:26).

The contexts pointed out are different enough as to prevent us from further extending our comment beyond these limits, particularly if the discussion involves the moral principles debated by pluralist discourses vis-à-vis the criticised absolutism-relativism perspectives that lead either to exclude all difference in favour of a single cultural model or to allow self-validating cultural expressions regardless of their incongruity (Olivé, 2004). Similar problems arise regarding the legal regulations and jurisdictional disputes on the political model that would apply in particular multicultural cases and its subsequent impact upon people's daily life (Colom, 2001). Instead of confronting each of these instances, we highlight the uneven expression of liberal cultural politics, for it allows us to contrast the shifts in a single discourse that appear as opposing ones. For these we take two examples.

First, we consider the immigration of indigenous populations from Guatemala in Mexican southern territories: the case of refugees puts into question the very concept of indigenous as a valid category to implicate plurality. Second, we discuss educational concerns and services for indigenous people in the Central High Plateau; bilingual and bicultural claims are at stake in a questioning indigenous people themselves first raised. We use both cases to reflect on the relation between ethnic diversity, migratory and educational affairs as these articulate within the current discourse on cultural plurality and cross-cultural communication in Mexico. Namely, the indigenist discourse inherited from the post-revolutionary project of nation that shaped Mexican nationalism throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

That the right-wing party today also proclaims such a discourse as an articulating element of its national project does not render a different approach to indigenous reality. In practice, the government has bestowed a public image of indigenous people: adverts with dialogues in indigenous languages are as common as the experience of seeing indigenous people wearing their customs in political meetings with the president. Still, this image differs little from the popular portraying of Indianhood developed during the 1920's and 1930's. Likewise, the current openness to cultural difference is hardly attributable to an isolated cultural campaign or else to the good will of a single person. It rather coincides with and reassures the global move toward the recognition of difference worldwide after the end of the Cold War: an outburst of local identities, bilingualism, environmentalism, gender struggles and claims for the liberty of sexual preferences. The indigenist discourse responds, implicitly or explicitly, to those changes.

### **Setting Out a Context**

There is no need to elaborate on the development of indigenist thought, but some

words would help us grasp its main nationalist expressions after the Revolution of 1910. Two points are relevant to our questioning about the conquest's aftermath. First, the Nahuas of the Central High Plateau became the ideal of Indianhood, a model of indigeneity upon which indigenist discourses developed from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This model provided for the articulation of an indigenous/non indigenous antithesis that reduced ethnic diversity to social categories that say very little of cultural difference. In accounting for social policies that regulate cultural behaviour and respond to indigenous demands, one thus tends to rely on categories of social and cultural belonging that deny specific ethnicities. It is our claim that a 'narrow' recognition of cultural plurality of this sort limits the scope and achievements of social programmes committed to indigenous populations.

Second, the conquest may have borne the disappearance of many native groups due to warfare and health related problems, yet the multiplicity of populations arriving from overseas increased. A growing biological variety and the proliferation of cultural expressions facilitated the interchange of genes and cultural traits, with the emergence of certain cross-breeding unity known as *mestizaje*. This process gave shape to a nationalist appropriation of an indigenous self so as to accomplish the attributes of Mexicanhood, an imaginary ideal that permeated most governmental actions toward indigenous groups during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Gómez, 2002). Significantly, the Mestizo concept shifted the place of some historical characters like Malintzin (female interpreter of Hernán Cortés), initially a traitor and then icon of multiculturalism and first builder of cross-cultural communication in Mexico (Stavenhagen, 2001).

As for the variety and specific character of cultural backgrounds in Mexico, these posit different problems to those of immigrants in Europe and the US looking for permanent residence with rights and obligations. The right to difference as expressed through indigenous demands of self-government and autonomy, and the right of ownership over natural resources are of particular significance, for they raise questions about Mexico's colonial past and the so-called internal colonialism (an unavoidable cul-de-sac of cultural policies contrasting with other nations' treatment of native diversity). Similarly, the discussion of multiculturalism and cross-cultural communication in Mexico necessarily implies that we to bear in mind the ethnocentric bias shaping the idea of plurality and the recognition of cultural difference that halt effective changes in favour of a more inclusive society. This is especially relevant considering the changing conditions most countries tackle as they enter into the global interchange of goods, people, technology and information.

Not accidentally, phobias and sympathies revolve around the possibility of faster cultural changes, or more exactly, the escalating inequities that come along with the spread of globalisation. The potential lost of Mexico's ancient cultures and inherent diversity may not be the only source of concern. Very few countries compete with a land culturally multiple, and rich too in a variety of ecological and geographical systems, and endemic species—one of the top five worldwide—that have a similar speed of devastation (Challenger, 1998). Since technological development foregrounds this situation, ambiguities develop regarding the vindicating claims of ethnic difference and local cultures vis-à-vis the blurring of economic barriers and the expanding flexibility of communication boundaries. In this context, the debate on the right of indigenous people to natural resources coincides with the recovery of indigenous knowledge so as to counteract both the advance of bio-prospecting and the threat of bio-piracy (Toledo, et al, 2002; Toly, 2004).

Migration and education, among the social factors boosting or suppressing diversity,

deserve especial attention given their impact upon the loss of indigenous languages and the transformation of linguistic practices. Not only is language an expression of cultural diversity, but it is also a key cultural trait under discussion in the construction of identity. Mexico provides salient examples for each case.

### **Interculturalism: A Promise or a Threat of Migration?**

Despite its undeniable role in increasing cultural diversity, international immigration has contributed little to Mexico's total population (about half a million in 2000). Spanish colonists brought with them African people as slaves, Chinese took the place of Mayas deported to Cuba in a desperate attempt to defeat the rebellion in Yucatan, and the British took advantage of governmental facilities to exploit mines and the railway network. During the last century people from nations in conflict also arrived to the country: Lebanese under civil war, Spaniards fleeing Franco's fascism, Chileans running away from Pinochet's persecution, Guatemalans evading military repression, Cubans rejecting Castro's regime and Argentineans escaping the economic crisis. Recently, Mexico's appeal to immigrants (not refugees), responds to its strategic location as a transitory destiny for those on their way to North America. As a matter of fact, Mexico is a main supplier of cultural diversity for other countries. Between 1995 and 2000, it provided 100 thousand immigrants (as China and India did) with the top recipient country being the United States. Mexican emigrants were mostly impoverished peasants crossing illegally to the US, many of whom belonged to indigenous groups—which made them twice as vulnerable as other immigrants. This population grows in absolute and relative numbers of both the people involved and the ethnic groups represented.

Notwithstanding, cultural diversity in Mexico is one of the world's largest. At least 67 different indigenous groups were officially registered (a population estimated at about 11 million, representing about 10% of Mexicans).<sup>1</sup> Only one million spoke indigenous languages, while 9 million were bilingual, adding to the 90 million of non-Indians who spoke Spanish, the language of the colonist. Regardless of their ethnicity and language, or their numbers—Nahuas (2.5 million) and Mayas (1.5 million), or Kikapues (251), Papagos (363) and Seris (716), to mention extreme figures—indigenous people are treated as a homogenous population. So treated, this people interact with a linguistically and culturally dominant majority, a *Mestizo* population that roughly exceeds a hundred million people.

Something similar happens in China, where 55 different groups amount to 50 million people in a Hanyu society of about 1.3 billion people and a territory of 10 million square kilometres (Haro, 2004). Mandarin, the official language, acts as the *lingua franca* of most Asian countries once under Han colonial rule. Not quite the opposite occurs in Canada, where the dilemma of pluralism has allowed the politics of bilingualism to officially become a reality. Here, 21% of the population is foreign-born worker, while 80 ethnic 'minorities' subsist in the territory (some of whom are heirs of the so-called 'first nations'). Still, the languages at stake in Canadian bicultural policies, English and French, are both colonial in origin (Morán, 2001; Kymlica, 2001).

This clearly exemplifies that insofar as attitudes remain unchanged, very little can actually be done to prevent ethnocentric bias from shaping cultural policies. By shifting the label Indian to indigenous people, ethnic group, or minority, not much is added to or erased

---

<sup>1</sup> See statistical adjustments to underestimations of indigenous populations due to linguistic criteria in Serrano, et.al. 2002.

from the discourse of cultural segregation. This does not deny the intended difference–content and focus–implied in the choice of one category over another, nor does it mean to cast off the historicity of such categories. Whether a category best suits a certain approach, the problem is the type and availability of information that lay emphasis on those categories.

In Mexico, indirect estimations of local ethnic groups rely on linguistic data offered in the general census of population and housing—among the few statistical sources with national coverage and adequate temporal continuity. However, neither ethnic identity nor cultural belonging are reducible to linguistic practices because the information at hand is linguistic. This gains relevance considering that a person is considered indigenous if he or she speaks a native language. Thus, some people are excluded from either category, Indian or Mestizo, because they no longer speak their mother tongue and yet live in an indigenous community. The degree of exclusion varies among ethnic groups, and depends on the type and place of residence: it is not the same to talk of hundred Kiliwas in Baja California, half of whom no longer speak their language; the 300 thousand Mazatecos in Oaxaca, Puebla, and Mexico City, a fifth of whom only speak Spanish; nor is it comparable to a locality with less than 100 residents in cities surpassing 20 million. Likewise, this exclusion relates with the phenomenon of migration, for the loss of indigenous languages is one among the sequels of population movements to urban areas and agricultural districts.

It is true that such a loss is in the first place imputable to discriminatory attitudes, as well as to long-lasting educational campaigns of “castellanización” (teaching of Spanish) that took place throughout the country during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet, migratory movements intensify the problem. Understanding how migration contributes to the dynamics of multiculturalism would facilitate a grasp of the permanence and transformation of cultural traits, particularly those concerning official and informal education in multicultural and plurallingual contexts. Chiapas stands as a remarkable case to illustrate this topic.

#### **Multiculturalism in a Context of Indigenous Diversity**

The construction of multicultural spaces and intercultural relations in Mexican southern territories is a long-lasting phenomenon that has depended on migratory flows since times previous to the conquest. More recently, the circulation of indigenous labour force for temporal work in coffee and tobacco plantations serves as a good example of spontaneous immigration. There is, on the other hand, the case of those forced to abandon their lands and properties: Guatemalan refugees seeking new homes during military and political prosecution in the 1980's, Zoques relocated after the eruption of the Chichonal Volcano in 1982, T'sot'sils and T'seltals affected by religious conflicts and civil confrontation in the 1990's. The case of Guatemalan refugees is particularly interesting, for it shows the precariousness of groups who remain ignored among the most underprivileged. Not only are they impoverished indigenous people forced to leave their homeland, but many are also illegal dwellers in a foreign country—a land to which their ancestors once belonged.<sup>2</sup>

In 1978, thousands of Guatemalan peasants, mostly Maya-Quiche, fled to Mexico escaping from *contrainsurgente* repression and settled in Chiapas. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) and the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados*

---

<sup>2</sup> Guatemala holds a history of kinship and cultural interchange closely related to Chiapas. The establishment of definite international frontiers in 1882 did not prevent Kanjobal and Chuj families in Mexico, for instance, from keeping in contact with their Guatemalan relatives.

(Comar) attended around 46 thousand in refugee camps. Some families congregated in camps regardless of whether lands were private, communal or *ejidal*,<sup>3</sup> some were dispersed in provisional camps and spur-of-the-moment villages nearby the border. Refugees increased once they were allowed to buy and found new localities; hence many of those settlements became refugee camps proper, recognised by governmental authorities. Massive exodus took place in 1982, and continued until 1984, when refugees in Chiapas were relocated either in Campeche and Quintana Roo, two other southern territories sharing frontier with Guatemala and Belize, or went back home.

Whether temporal or permanent, migration has relevant consequences. A change of residence is more than the increase of population's absolute numbers—adding to the benefits and dangers in the economy of recipient and expelling countries—or the multiplication of ethnic diversity in a given territory. Migration also introduces people to different ways of perceiving the relationship of men with their surroundings, and conveys the negotiation of frontiers with other cultures and societies. The Mexican State together with non-governmental organisations and the UNHCR had an active part in the definition of the forms of integration and repatriation of Guatemalan refugees. Cultural diversity was hardly considered in such a definition and decisions remained centralised in character (Aguayo, *et al.*, 1989), or else were biased in favour of ethnic groups to which leaders belonged. As a result, various changes took place that had an ambiguous impact upon specific cultural and social practices.

This happened with collective work regarding agricultural activities, and educative policies encompassing institutional activities and urban planning in refugee camps. Productive projects and workshops were organised with the intention to allow people to become self-sufficient, and favour the introduction of fertilisers, insecticides and heavy machinery, with a subsequent infertility and deterioration of tropical forest soils (Bellón, 1993). Employment in agricultural activities and the access to land, water and firewood remained problematic due to low payments and the economic burden refugees represented for hosting communities (Cruz, 1998).

Refugees sought to tie bonds with Mexican people and gave impulse to new forms of social organisation since their arrival. Mixed marriages of refugees with other indigenous groups and Mestizos, and the recognition of women's right to inherit lands and properties, built up so as to overcome patriarchal normative and male oriented prejudices. Patronal celebrations and responsibilities in fraternities (*cofradías*) and guardianship (*mayordomía*), were simplified, including the creation of musical and dancing groups. Religious preferences changed with the foundation of new localities and the modification of settlement patterns with serious internal conflicts, some of which involved the vindication of cultural traits and the recovery of indigenous languages (Hernández, 2000). Vernacular languages had remained in use for everyday life communication, yet the lack of a linguistic competence so as to enable interaction of all groups in a single language brought about the election of bilingual male leaders who not only knew Spanish, but also had proven capacity to negotiate with the 'exterior' (Nolasco, *et al.*, 2003).

The State's normative participation had much to do with language and education, both targets of cultural policies. Good examples were festivities and parades at public schools in commemoration of patriotic or historical events and heroes, among many other forms of

---

<sup>3</sup> On the different land tenure system that evolved after the Revolution, particularly those relevant for indigenous communities, see Calva, 1993; and Eckstein, 1966.

enacting lay official ritualism vis-à-vis sacred celebrations (Beezly, *et.al.*, 1994). Needless to say these were culture-specific histories and heroic pantheons. Guatemalan kids had to wear customs evoking the Mexican Revolution or dress up with regional folk suits during such festivities. Their study week started with the intonation of the national anthem and honours to the Mexican flag, like any public school in the country has done since post-revolutionary years to the present.

Such a situation brings into discussion the topic of identity and its reconfiguration in contexts where different cultural and historical backgrounds get into contact. Likewise, it posits questions such as how to account for a shared historical and cultural bondage regardless of political frontiers, particularly international, in terms of heritage and the rights over this heritage—i.e., education and curricula (Alejos & Ajanel, 1992; Santiago, 1992; Bonfil, 1981). Further, it leaves an empty space for the resignification of nationalism and the pertinence of indigenist discourse. Among the indigenous languages that enlarge Mexico's cultural legacy, there are those spoken by people who, as a matter of fact, are not Mexican but are counted as such as they fall into the category Indian.

The irony plays full. Mexico's ethnic diversity has been nourished by the cultural particularisms of Guatemalan refugees, while the critical process of assuming their loss and regaining confidence implied a rearticulation of the refugees' own identity through the suppression of cultural expressions, like the use of their mother tongue and clothing, that would have given them too much visibility otherwise (Barrios, 1992). The ambiguity is not restricted to Guatemalan refugees. After imposing official history, Mexican, and language, Spanish, upon indigenous people for decades, now the State tries to foster the creation of spaces for expressing indigenous culture and recovering indigenous languages (cf. PNDPI, 2001).

It is all the more interesting to contrast the critical attitude of indigenous teachers who question the validity of bilingual and bicultural educational programmes (Calvo & Donnadiou, 1992) with the opinion of parents that suggests that bilingual teachers are guilty of the loss of their children's mother tongue. This contrast reflects an opposition between home and school as if in a cultural clash, the first being a space in which cultural continuity takes place:

I believe that the mistake is ... the school, because there many children of different age play, there teachers talk to them in Spanish, of course, little by little they abandon the language. ... I know by experience ... my son is Mam, my daughter in law a Kekchi ... she speaks to him in *Castilla* but is learning to speak Mam with me ... *Castilla* is what you learn with the teacher, here we speak our dialect, that of our tradition, when we were born, the one used inside home.<sup>4</sup>

The question remains open as to how, if not by means of a *lingua franca*, can we tackle the problem of ethnicity in a culturally diverse milieu in which indigenous leaders are perfectly capable of negotiating in Spanish, whether spoken or written, while internal assemblies and local debates take place in indigenous languages. Not to mention that few federal or local authorities, if any, know an indigenous language. Linguistic policies toward indigenous populations offer possible answers: the lost of indigenous mother tongue became a matter of concern until recently, when intellectuals and the society started to think of it as a

---

<sup>4</sup> Testimony of Francisco, Mam adult male. Alonso, Marina. Fieldwork notes. Quetzal Edzná, Campeche, 1999.

lost of the nation's cultural diversity.

Certainly one has to acclaim the effort of bringing education to isolated indigenous communities, as well as the recognition of cultural difference and indigenous languages as a token that grants the flourishing of pluralism. We do not negate that languages must be valued and kept alive as far as possible, which somehow amounts to a claim that languages hardly avoid extinction if inefficient as a means of communication (Bartolomé & Barabas, 1990). Neither do we disclaim that language facilitates the identification of ethnic groups. However, it should be borne in mind that the reference to ethnicity is in any case linguistic. Insofar as language allows one to trace a historical continuity of one-self, of one's own belongings, and the sharing with others, language correlates with identity. This is the dilemma of bilingual and bicultural educational programmes.

### **Multicultural Education: For Whom?**

Intense debates on indigenous education have polarised intellectuals and politicians as early as the times of the conquest. Although debates continued during the colony and after the independence, governments did little for the education of indigenous people no matter if that could have prevented riots and rebellions that one way or the other led indigenous people to participate in the Revolution of 1910. After the civil war, the incorporation of indigenous people into the national project involved a paradoxical acknowledgement of an indigenous self at the core of Mexican identity: forcing Indians to renounce their identity, since their cultural traits were considered a reminder of the colonial past, which conveyed subjugation and underdevelopment (cf. Aguirre and Pozas, 1981).

Among different alternatives to solve the problem of rural underdevelopment, the process of *castellanización* (learning Spanish) became a key element in the provision of basic education: if everyone spoke the same language—it was claimed—all would share the same values. This campaign was meant to bring indigenous people to progress while effacing remaining negative signs, itself a laudable goal: to facilitate the access to information so that indigenous people could better defend themselves against abuses, and would gain access to health services. However, learning Spanish soon proved insufficient for the purposes of national integration.

Not only did indigenous populations reject 'outside' public policies, regardless of the languages they spoke, but neither could they also internalise the knowledge they were expected to achieve (Brice, 1986). This could reflect the lack of attention paid to cultural specificity, as well as the intrinsic troubles of mechanical learning such as using short-term mnemonic strategies—problems that are not exclusive of indigenous populations (cf. INEA, 2004; 2002). In this respect, it is interesting to find out that children in fourth year of primary school in Mexico, regardless their social background, do better in mathematics than in language (UNESCO, 2004). The few interest that supposedly 'easy' topics like grammar or syntax receive on the part of teachers and students worsens in isolated regions where Spanish is not a daily life language, increasing the difficulties faced in indigenous education.

Experience also made clear that literacy has little to do with language itself, but with the type and the availability of educational materials in given languages (IIA, 1980; Brice, 1986). A blind trust on literacy derives from the presupposition that all languages have a written form, or at least can be transferred into a written alphabet; hence, the importance to learn to read and write. This undermines the recognition of oral communication as a valid form to transmit knowledge, though it relies on the prospect of recording and transcribing oral

data as its source of objectivity (Garza and Lastra, 2000). We cannot further elaborate here on this ongoing discussion, except from the questions it posits as to what the goal of indigenous education should be.

Above all, the problem is the definition of indigeneity, and the criteria to select the populations liable of indigenous education, i.e., what an indigenous community or locality is. As much as the latter definition relies on linguistic criteria, indigenous education presents at least two main inconsistencies. First, it is a linguistic-centered system with deficiencies derived from ignoring dialectic variables. Due to the neglect of ethnic differences, teaching training is defective insofar as indigenous education is systematically restricted and cultural elements are not transferred into curricular contents. Classroom dynamics respond to a national curriculum elaborated under the precepts of the *Plan y Programas de Educación Básica* that consider indigenous cultures superficially. Didactic materials are insufficient and do not satisfy the cultural needs of the supposed beneficiaries, becoming useless and obsolete. In short, the claim of a learning process—educational contents, materials, and methodology—that is articulated with the cultural traits of the target population is rhetorical in practice.

Second, given the emphasis on linguistic practices, large numbers of people are excluded who require indigenous education—social statistical instruments do not count them as indigenous people since they no longer speak their mother tongue. This exclusion works in detriment of both the continuity of some cultural practices and the right of a person to receive a culturally suitable education. Some indigenous people have argued against a ‘separate’ system of education in similar terms than those Kymlicka uses to examine the pros and cons of separate schools—religious and ethnic—to teach citizenship responsibility in a Canadian context (2001). Mazahuas teachers in the Central High Plateau express not only the nonsense of their labour in terms of the lack of bilingual contents proper and therefore of materials for educational programmes, but they also denounce the perils of accepting the title of ‘indigenous’ teacher as a narrowing down of their own capacities and range of expertise as teachers, preventing their own professional promotion and reducing their possibilities of finding a job (Calvo & Donnadieu, 1992).

Institutions responsible for providing indigenous education reflect those limitations. Currently, two main institutions cope with indigenous educational demands. The *Dirección General de Educación Indígena* (DGEI), founded in 1978, is an operative branch of the *Secretaría de Educación Pública* with national coverage and subject to regulations and norms of the federal ministry. Considering the Federal Constitution, and more specifically, the *Ley General de Educación*, the DGEI emphasises several lines of action regarding indigenous education and the acquisition of certain competence: identity, democracy, international solidarity, health, ecology, aesthetics, science and technology. It aims to increase the capacity of indigenous people to effectively communicate orally and in written form both in Spanish and indigenous languages, as well as enabling the use of body language and non-alphabetic conventional signs (cf. SEP, 1999).

The *Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo* (CONAFE) is another institution that attends indigenous populations by means of its *Programa de Atención Educativa a Población Indígena* (PAEPI), initiated in 1994. This is a decentralised organisation with proper heritage and juridical capacity, providing basic education to those who live in localities that have no regular academic service given the dispersed distribution of the population or the scarcity of children of school age (official schools require a minimum of 25 kids). The PAEPI focuses on communities of 100 inhabitants or less for primary school and of 500 inhabitants or less for

nursery schools. By 2000, its coverage had passed from 8 to 20 states, attending nearly 3 thousand communities with 60 languages and local variations. As for the staff, the CONAFE facilitates the sharing of values and language by recruiting young people with secondary school background who wish to comply with their social service in the same geo-cultural area. This builds on the strategic idea that an active partner will employ his/her knowledge of community cultural practices, as well as his/her reflective and critical abilities for communal education, helping to consolidate students' written abilities, whether in their language or in Spanish, by reinforcing information, behavioural expectations, skills, and cognitive and leisure activities (PREAL, 2002; PAEPI, 2003).

Most educational rural centres attended by either institution, nonetheless, respond to obsolete and official teaching structures. Indigenous students are conceived of as a mere receptacle of information that has nothing to do with their own cultural contexts. Ideas and forms of understanding imposed upon these students' cognitive systems often contradict what is regarded as valid or reasonable in their own culture. Teachers tend to leave discussions of interculturalism aside, preventing students from contrasting their own culture with that of others. Similarly, they are likely to ignore the cultural reality of students, building up the self-negation of their own indigenous identity.

Federal authorities, for instance, announced in 2004 the creation of a new field of study in indigenous languages that would promote respect for indigenous cultures (cf. SEP online). The *Programa para el Fortalecimiento de la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe* has achieved an important coverage in terms of the elaboration of materials in different languages and dialectal varieties, the development of several teaching didactics and writing skills (CDI, 2005). But this has been insufficient so far. Rather than solving the problem of indigenous education, the implementation of a specific subject on indigenous languages in the curricula implies an understanding of the indigenous realm as a reality split from national culture. Likewise, the question of what languages should receive priority is political instead of technical, for it deals with the definition of the plural society one has in mind (Bonfil, 1988).

It is impossible to ignore absolute numbers—some groups hardly amount to 100 people, while others surmount a million inhabitants—but the problem does not stop there. No one means to deny the right to speak and learn in one's own language as a valid fundamental right (Hamel, 1995), but allowing too much variety into textbooks would prevent achieving academic unity. Nor should one reduce culture or identity to linguistic expressions even when accepting that language contains in itself the conceptions of the world in which someone lives, including the notions of self and other (Manrique, 1997). It is our claim that the teaching of indigenous education must address language holistically while introducing textbooks and complementary materials according to local contexts. This is not to promote the creation of numerous single texts, all too different so as to preclude the national curriculum from working. The latter should reflect our country's cultural diversity whether or not the beneficiary is indigenous. Complementary materials and the methodology employed to transmit information may vary according to target populations. All this would allow both a normative parameter to function and sufficient flexibility to evaluate the achievements of educational programmes. The implementation of a subject on indigenous language as such should be done into Mestizo contexts as well in order to break with a narrow insight of bilingual education (cf. Díaz, 1991).

### **Conclusions: Diversity in the Technological Milieu**

The development and introduction of electronic technological tools such as the Internet and educational software has inflamed the ongoing debate as to whether the hegemony of Western educational contents and strategies would worsen in spaces of formal education (Coronado & Hodge, 2004). No extreme solution seems good enough to diminish the threat of an overwhelming technological avalanche that affects both indigenous and non-indigenous people, as well as poor and illiterate or rich and educated populations. Disregarding the benefits of technology would only weaken the power people might have to negotiate in the scenario of global and international communication, but culture and identity stability are at risk if market interests are overemphasised in this process (UNESCO, 1999). Of those spaces the indigenous seems the most vulnerable of all, as geographical isolation and economic difficulties combine with linguistic barriers among the population.

The use of electronic and data processing devices, and designing electronic didactic materials for indigenous people, is urgent. The transcription of oral traditions into a written format, and making this information electronically available and suitable for target groups faces the same basic problems of textbooks. Most educational software available in the national market has been elaborated abroad, offering a 'foreign' cultural vision of Mexican reality, while the contents of materials made in Mexico reflect an urban 'orientalised' logic. Likewise, electronic materials tend to be merely informative, with little or no use of interactive methodology. Bilingual and bicultural educational materials are scarce and nourish the belief that there is a better cultural offer than that of indigenous people themselves, with the following disregard of local realities.

Intercultural education usually implies a relationship between a community with the 'exterior', with Western cultures, and it is hardly considered as the interaction of multiple communities among themselves. The vindication of diversity and multicultural indigeneity requires revaluing an understanding of the relationship between community and the 'exterior' so as to avow the fact that indigenous people integrate elements of foreign cultural traits into their own value system as a conscious and voluntary decision. Focusing then on indigenous knowledge and communal practices would allow students to see themselves portrayed in the contents of textbooks and educational materials, and would get more actively involved in education. This would facilitate cultural interaction and foment the practice of tolerance.

No intention is held here to deny the progress of allowing access to information in indigenous languages or the setting up of satellite connectivity in rural areas by means of governmental investment. Indigenous textbooks and educational software are fundamental for bringing cultural concepts and practices into an articulated plan of basic education that would respect cultural practices. It is nonetheless the premise supporting such a methodology that has been at stake here. For an effective cross-cultural communication with indigenous people, we must first overcome the idea of plurality that builds on a dichotomy of indigenous and non-indigenous as two monolithic, self-contained and mutually excluding cultural realms. If not, we would only offer indigenous people a partial admission to our global modern world.

#### References

- Aguayo, S., Christensen, O. L., & Varesse, S. (1989). *Los refugiados guatemaltecos en Campeche y Quintana Roo. Condiciones sociales y culturales*. Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo Social, El Colegio de México.
- Aguirre, B. G. & Pozas, A. R. (1981). *La política indigenista en México: instituciones*

- indígenas en el México actual. Métodos y resultados, Tomo II.* Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes.
- Alejos, G. J. & Ajanel, M. (1992). Indígenas guatemaltecos frente a sus problemas educativos en el centro de México. In G. Freyermuth & R. Hernández (Coords.). *Una década de refugio en México. Los refugiados guatemaltecos y los derechos humanos* (pp. 213-221). Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos.
- Barrios, R. W. E. (1992). El problema de la identidad étnico-nacional. In G. Freyermuth & R. Hernández, (Coords.). *Una década de refugio en México. Los refugiados guatemaltecos y los derechos humanos* (pp.193-199). Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos.
- Bartolomé, M. & Barabas, A. (1990). *La presa Cerro de Oro y el Ingeniero El Gran Dios, tomo I.* Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista.
- Bellón, M. R. (1993). Conocimiento tradicional, cambio tecnológico y manejo de recursos: saberes y prácticas productivas de los campesinos en el cultivo de variedades de maíz en un ejido en el estado de Chiapas. In E. Leff & J Carabias (Coords.). *Cultura y manejo sustentable de los recursos naturales. Volumen II* (pp. 297-327). Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones Interdisciplinarias en Humanidades (UNAM), Miguel Ángel Porrúa, Red de Formación Ambiental para América y el Caribe (PNUMA).
- Beezley, W. H., Martin, Ch. E. & French, W. E. (Eds.). (1994). *Rituals of Rule, Rituals of Resistance: Public Celebrations and Popular Culture in Mexico.* Wilmington DE: SR Books.
- Bonfil, B. G. (1988). Panorama étnico y cultural en México. In R. Stavenhagen (Comp.). *Política cultural para un país multiétnico. Panorama étnico y cultural de México.* (pp.61-66). Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública.
- Bonfil, B. G. (1981). Historias que no son historias todavía. In *Historia ¿para qué?* (pp. 227-245). Mexico: Siglo XXI.
- Brice, H. S. (1986). *La política del lenguaje en México: de la colonia a la nación.* Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista.
- Calva, J. L. (1993). *La disputa por la tierra. La reforma del Artículo 27 y la nueva Ley Agraria.* Mexico: Fonatamara, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.
- Calvo, P. B. & Donnadiou, A. L. (1992). *Una educación ¿indígena, bilingüe y bicultural?. Capacitación diferencial de los maestros mazahuas.* Mexico: Colección Miguel Othón de Mendizábal. Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.
- CDI. (2005). *Acciones de Gobierno para el Desarrollo Integral de los Pueblos Indígenas. Informe 2003-2004.* Mexico: Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas.
- Challenger, A. (1998). *Utilización y conservación de los ecosistemas terrestres de México. Pasado, presente y futuro.* Collaboration of Caballero, J. Mexico: Comisión Nacional para el Conocimiento y Uso de la Biodiversidad, Instituto de Biología (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México), Agrupación Sierra Madre, S.C.
- Colom, G. F. (2001). El nacionalismo y la quimera de la homogeneidad. In F. Colom G. (Ed.). *El espejo, el mosaico y el crisol. Modelos políticos para el multiculturalismo* (pp. 11-33). Col. Autores, Textos y Temas. Barcelona, Spain: Ciencias Sociales, n. 29.

- Anthopos. Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- Coronado, G. & Hodge, B. (2004). *El hipertexto multicultural en México posmoderno. Paradojas e incertidumbres*. Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Miguel Ángel Porrúa.
- Cruz, B. J. L. (1998). *Identidades en fronteras, fronteras en identidades. Elogio de la intensidad de los tiempos en los pueblos de la frontera sur*. Mexico: El Colegio de México.
- Díaz, C. E. (1991). Diversidad sociocultural y educación en México. *Simposio de Educación y Cultura. La reflexión actual en México*. Nov. 1990, Mexico City MX: Universidad Pedagógica Nacional, Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.
- Eckstein, S. (1966). *El ejido colectivo en México*. Mexico: Sección de Obras de Economía. Fondo de Cultura Económica.
- Garza, C. B. & Lastra, Y. (2000). Lenguas en peligro de extinción en México. In R. H. Robins, E. M. Uhlenbeck, & B. Garza C. (Eds.). *Lenguas en Peligro* (pp. 139-178). Colección Obra Diversa. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- Gómez, A. A. (2002). *Deconstructing Nationalist Representations of Mexican Identity: a Struggle for the Appropriation of Indigenous Symbols in Post-revolutionary and Catholic Historical Narratives of the Conquest*. PhD thesis. UK: University of Essex.
- Hamel, R. E. (1995). Derechos lingüísticos como derechos humanos: debates y perspectivas *Alteridades* 5 (10), 11-23.
- Haro, N. F. J. (2004). Constructing Chinese Identity. In I. Hussain. *Tyranny of the Soft Touches: Interculturalism, Multiculturalism, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century International Relations* (pp.75-94). Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana.
- Hernández, C. R. A. (2000). Los protestantismos indígenas de frente al siglo XXI: religión e identidad entre los mayas de Chiapas. *Religiones y Sociedad*. n.8, 57-74.
- Hussain, I. (2004). *Tyranny of the Soft Touches: Interculturalism, Multiculturalism, and 21<sup>st</sup> Century International Relations*. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana.
- IIA. (1980). *Indigenismo y lingüística. Documentos del foro "La política del lenguaje en México"*. Mexico: Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- INEA. (2004). *Educación indígena en el INEA*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos. Dirección Académica, Subdirección de Contenidos Diversificados. Documento interno. Mimeograph.
- INEA. (2002). *Comentarios y recomendaciones a la propuesta educativa de bialfabetización con los grupos tseltal y tsotsil de Chiapas*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional para la Educación de los Adultos. Dirección Académica, Subdirección de Proyectos Estratégicos, Departamento Técnico de Educación Indígena. Mimeograph.
- Kymlica, W. (2001). Educación para la ciudadanía. In F., Colom G. (Ed.). *El espejo, el mosaico y el crisol. Modelos políticos para el multiculturalismo* (pp. 251-283). Col. Autores, Textos y Temas. Ciencias Sociales, n. 29. Barcelona: Anthopos, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- Manrique, C. L. (Coord.). (1988). Lenguas, historia y cultura. In *Atlas Cultural de México. Lingüística* (pp. 83-121). Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Editorial Planeta.
- Morán, E. J: G. (2001). Al norte del liberalismo: el contexto canadiense de un debate filosófico. In F. Colom G. (Ed.). *El espejo, el mosaico y el crisol. Modelos políticos*

- para el multiculturalismo* (pp. 147-185). Col. Autores, Textos y Temas. Ciencias Sociales, n. 29. Barcelona: Anthopos, Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana.
- Nolasco, M., Alonso, M.; Cuadriello, H.; Megchún, R.; Hernández, M.; Pacheco, A. (2003). Una visión de lo heterogéneo: nuevas formas de estructura social de los indios de Los Altos, de la Selva de Chiapas y de los refugiados guatemaltecos de la Frontera Sur. In S. Millán, J. Valle (Coords.). *La comunidad sin límites. Estructura social y organización comunitaria en las regiones indígenas de México. Vol. I* (pp. 213-288). Colección Etnografía de los Pueblos Indígenas de México, Serie Ensayos. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia.
- PNDPI. (2001). *Programa Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. 2001-2006*. Mexico: Presidencia de la República, Oficina de Representación para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas. Instituto Nacional Indigenista.
- Olivé, L. (2004). *Interculturalismo y justicia social. Autonomía e identidad cultural en la era de la globalización*. Col. La Pluralidad Cultural en México, n. 2. Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- PAEPI. (2003). *Propuesta Educativa. Programa de Atención Educativa a Población Indígena*. Mexico: Secretaría de Educación Pública. Consejo Nacional de Fomento Educativo.
- PREAL. (2002). *Formas y reformas de la educación. Serie mejores prácticas. Experiencias con población indígena: la introducción de la educación bicultural y bilingüe*. Mexico: Programa de Promoción de la Reforma Educativa. Feb (2)10.
- Santiago, Ch. M. E. (1992). Situación educativa de la población guatemalteca refugiada en México. In G. Freyermuth, R. Hernández (Coords.). *Una década de refugio en México. Los refugiados guatemaltecos y los derechos humanos* (pp.241-244). Mexico: Centro de Investigaciones y estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, Instituto Chiapaneco de Cultura, Academia Mexicana de Derechos Humanos.
- SEP. (1999). *Lineamientos Generales para la Educación Intercultural Bilingüe para las Niñas y los Niños Indígenas*. Mexico. Dirección General de Educación Indígena, Subsecretaría de Educación Básica y Normal. Secretaría de Educación Pública. URL [Online] [http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb2/sep/sep\\_Bol2430803](http://www.sep.gob.mx/wb2/sep/sep_Bol2430803).
- Serrano, C. E., Embriz, O. A. & Fernández, H. P. (Coords.). (2002). *Indicadores socioeconómicos de los pueblos indígenas de México, 2002*. Mexico: Instituto Nacional Indigenista, Programa de Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo, Consejo Nacional de Población.
- Stavenhagen, R. (2001). Los derechos culturales y los derechos colectivos en tiempos de la globalización. In I. Beuren, O. Soto B. (Coords.). (2004). *Derechos humanos y globalización alternativa: una perspectiva iberoamericana* (pp. 127-145). Colección Separata, n. 7. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente, Comisión de Derechos Humanos del DF, de Puebla, de San Luis Potosí.
- Toledo, V. M., Alarcón, Ch. P., Moguel, P., Olivo, M., Cabrera1, A., Leyequien, E. & Rodríguez, A. A. (2002). Biodiversidad y pueblos indios en México y Centroamérica. Síntesis del Atlas Etnoecológico de México y Centroamérica. *Etnoecológica n. 8*. URL [Online] [www.etnoecologica.org.mx](http://www.etnoecologica.org.mx).
- Toly, N. J. (2004). Globalization and the Capitalization of Nature: a Political Ecology of Biodiversity in Mesoamerica. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society* 24(1), 47-54.

- UNESCO. (2004). *La conclusión universal de la educación primaria en América Latina: ¿Estamos en verdad tan cerca?*. Informe Regional sobre los Objetivos de Desarrollo del Milenio vinculados a la educación. Paris: Mimeograph.
- UNESCO. (1999). *Informe mundial sobre la comunicación. Los medios frente al desafío de las nuevas tecnologías*. Madrid: UNESCO, Fundación Santa María.