

Grande Reportagem

**Morrer
no Alentejo**

**Açores,
os tesouros
submersos**

**Sintra,
o betão
prometido**



Sahara Occidental

A missão portuguesa

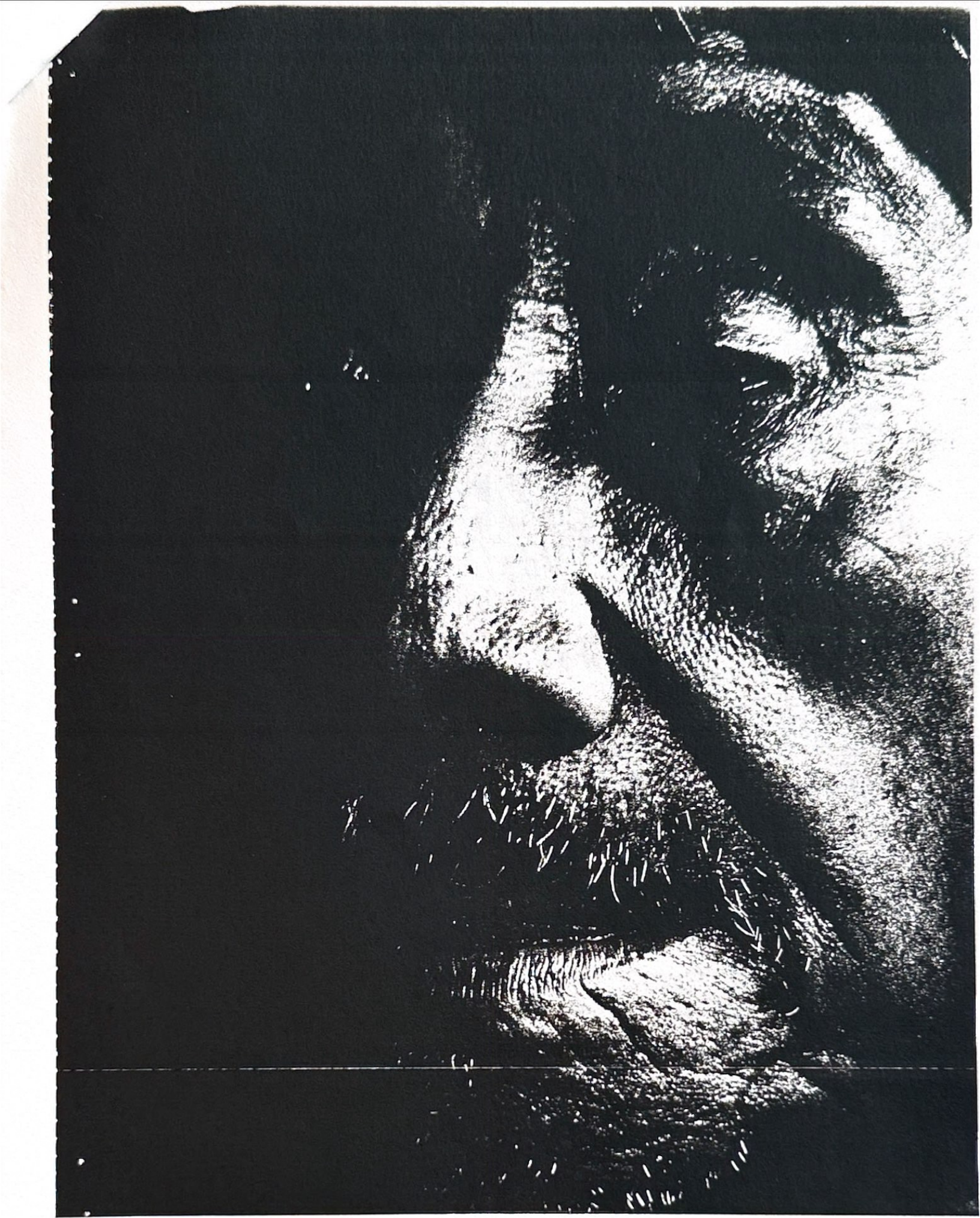
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o último senhor dos maias

O velho balança-se docemente na rede. De olhos fechados, murmura baixinho. Ali perto, as suas duas mulheres conversam e riem enquanto moem os grãos de milho, transformando-os em farinha para as *tortillas*. Chan K'in segura o charuto entre os dedos retorcidos pela artrite e conta histórias maias sobre a criação do mundo e o *xu'tan*, o apocalipse. Retrato do último senhor de uma civilização perdida.

Texto de Catherine Ryan, fotografias de William Warner



Alguns antropólogos acreditam que o velho Chan K'in, que morreu a 23 de Dezembro de 1996, foi o último dos *halach winik*, os grandes senhores da civilização Olmec-Maia, com mais de três mil e quinhentos anos de história. Deste modo, atribuem-lhe a liderança espiritual e tradicional sobre as ruínas antigas e famosas de Palenque, Tikal, Yaxchilán, Copán, Chichén Itzá e Mayapán, no México e na América Central. A herança exacta do velho Chan K'in é controversa — alguns peritos afirmam que ele descende dos índios Chol ou Itzá, da vizinha Guatemala, e não dos originais Lacandons. Mas todos os especialistas da civilização maia concordam que o velho Chan K'in era um símbolo cultural — uma relíquia preciosa da herança mexicana pré-hispânica. Morreu com mais de cem anos e durante a sua vida foi um pedaço de História viva.

Quando vi o velho Chan K'in, pouco antes da sua morte, pareceu-me um homem selvagem genuíno — de cabelo comprido e despenteado —, que usava a túnica comprida branca, tradicional da sua tribo. Era ele o conselheiro dos duzentos maias lacandons que restam na aldeia remota de Nahá, na floresta de Chiapas. Um velho sábio, astuto e poético, que vivia em reclusão, a grande distância da civilização moderna.

Muitos dos filhos do velho Chan K'in e outros parentes seus abandonaram Nahá para vender aos turistas arcos e setas enfeitadas com penas de papagaios, nas ruínas de Palenque. A maior parte dos homens e mulheres lacandons ainda usam as mesmas túnicas brancas, de algodão, tal como o velho Chan K'in — vestidos compridos que antigamente eram feitos

de casca de árvore — e ainda deixam crescer o cabelo comprido e igualmente desalinhado. Mas, nos últimos quatro anos, vários jovens de Palenque têm vindo a cortar o cabelo e muitos deles já usam roupas ocidentais logo que acaba o dia das vendas — antes de se dirigirem para os seus apartamentos, ali perto.

Arturo Kayum II, um rapaz lacandon de doze anos, sente-se feliz por mostrar Palenque aos visitantes e por contar, detalhadamente, as velhas lendas e a his-

um dos 24 filhos do velho Chan K'in, também vende *curios* nas ruínas. Actualmente, poucos visitantes lhe perguntam pelo pai, mas *Tercero*, de boa vontade — e por cem dólares — se dispõe a fazer a viagem de cinco horas na sua carrinha *Volkswagen*, pela quase inultrapassável estrada da montanha, até à lendária casa do seu pai. Sem ele — ou outro guia — a comunidade de Nahá é virtualmente impossível de encontrar.

"Pensamos que o pai tenha 120 anos", diz *Tercero*, dominando soberbamente o seu veículo por um troço de lama especialmente traiçoeiro, em direcção a Nahá. "Até há pouco tempo, ele ainda trabalhava muito. O seu campo de milho estava sempre bem tratado. Agora fica em casa e são as mulheres que tomam conta dele." Faz uma pausa, sorri, e acrescenta que o pai teve mais um filho, que agora tem quase dois anos. "Parece-me que o velho nunca irá parar", diz, a rir. "É melhor do que qualquer um de nós."

Tercero comenta que gostaria de desenvolver um negócio de turismo de aventura, conduzindo regularmente os visitantes de Palenque até à sua terra natal. "Levava-os

às lagoas de Nahá para nadarem, e depois remavam numa canoa *mahogany* para irem a outro lago ver os crocodilos", diz entusiasticamente "E vão conhecer os Lacandons e as nossas cerimónias de queima de incenso e o *balché* [bebida]. Vão acampar; e ainda podem ir visitar as outras ruínas, também." O maior obstáculo é esta estrada profundamente degradada e desmoronada.

Tercero aponta para uma *ceiba* solitária, reverenciada pelos Maias como a "árvore da vida", e começa a falar da rápi-



Entre os Lacandons, o arco e a flecha continuam a ter serventia

tória do templo em ruínas. Não é um guia oficial mas é um entusiástico contador de histórias. Tal como os outros lacandons, parece orgulhoso e tranquilo, habituado a que os estrangeiros se extasiem perante a sua aparência primitiva. O seu cabelo, liso e preto, desce até meio das costas. Se não fosse o relógio *Casio* no pulso, ao vê-lo subir a antiga escada, em pedaços, do famoso Templo das Inscrições, julgaríamos estar perante uma imagem de um milénio passado.

Chan K'in III (*Tercero*), de 35 anos,



Na aldeia de Chan K'in, o traje usado ainda é o tradicional: uma longa túnica branca de algodão

da dizimação da floresta tropical lacandon. Quilômetros de tocos de árvores, recentemente cortados, espalham-se em todas as direções. Ainda não há muito tempo, tudo aqui era luxuriante floresta. Em 1972, o governo mexicano doou todo este território — mais de 600 mil hectares — aos Lacandons e classificou a maior parte dele como reserva biológica.

Mais tarde, no entanto, num negócio controverso aprovado, por fim, pelos próprios Lacandons, madeireiros *mahogany* invadiram a região em 1978 e extraíram

quase todas as madeiras preciosas. De caminho, destruíram a maior parte da floresta. Mais tarde, madeireiros ilegais roubaram muitas das árvores restantes. Os criadores de gado, em busca de novos pastos, limpavam e queimavam grande parte da já saqueada terra, para as suas manadas. Muitas das antigas colinas e montanhas verdes, no caminho para Nahá, estão agora totalmente desnudadas.

Tercero recorda que quando o primeiro tractor chegou a Nahá: "...era adolescente. Ouvimos um grande barulho que

nunca tínhamos ouvido antes. Durante três dias estivemos escondidos. Nem sequer um carro tínhamos visto antes. Finalmente, o meu pai disse-nos que podíamos voltar. Mas quando vimos as mandíbulas do tractor tivemos a certeza de que íamos ser comidos, tal como ele devorava as árvores. Era aterrorizador". No ano seguinte, os madeireiros concluíram a lamacenta estrada da floresta. "Porque antes, para irmos a Palenque, tínhamos de andar durante duas semanas", recorda *Tercero*.

"Naquele tempo comíamos regu- ►

► larmente macacos, iguanas e outros animais selvagens. Mas agora raramente se avista uma dessas criaturas por aqui", diz. E fica em silêncio durante alguns minutos. "O meu pai diz que o fim do mundo vem aí. Em breve começarão os terremotos, segundo ele. E, como a floresta tem sido abatida, cada vez chove menos. É tudo muito triste. Vai ver. E as antigas profecias estão a realizar-se. Em breve, morreremos todos."

Tercero arruma a carrinha *Volkswagen* junto a uma enorme tenda que serve de supermercado de Nahá, vendendo uma pequena quantidade de comida enlatada e tecidos. *Tercero* segue à frente, subindo uma vereda ventosa, no meio das bananeiras e arbustos, até ao cimo, onde fica a cabana do seu pai. Aldeões descalços, todos com trajes nativos, vêm saudá-lo ao longo do caminho e pedir-lhe que transporte os seus fardos de arcos e flechas, acabados de fazer, para os parentes que trabalham em Palenque. Poucos são os veículos e raros os visitantes que chegam aqui.

Tercero aponta para uma antena parabólica montada entre os telhados de colmo das cabanas. "O meu pai teve uma televisão durante dois anos. Mas depois estragou-se. Tudo o que é eléctrico chega aqui e recusa-se a trabalhar", explica, rindo. "Talvez não estivesse destinado a acontecer." Em 1990, a electricidade chegou a Nahá. Os fios telefónicos é que ainda não. Aponta para uma pequena escola. No ano passado, o governo mandou uma professora oficial para Nahá, pela primeira vez, diz.

O velho Chan K'in está a fazer uma sesta na rede do seu quarto. Uma das suas mulheres anuncia-lhe a chegada de

visitantes. Enquanto o pai se veste, *Tercero* comenta que o velho sobreviveu tanto tempo graças à harmonia entre a sua vida e a terra, e por prestar culto a Hachak'yum e aos deuses menores.

O pequeno velho aparece finalmente na cozinha, apoiado numa bengala, apertando alegremente as mãos, sorrindo e sentando-se noutra rede ali perto. O seu cabelo preto está ligeiramente embranquecido, mas o seu olhar é vivo e frontal. Depois de breves formalidades, lança-se



Na aldeia, os mais novos ainda usam os cabelos compridos até meio das costas, costume que muitos deixam de cumprir quando emigram para a cidade

no mundo místico das previsões e profecias lendárias. Começa por uma complicada descrição da criação. Depois passa para uma discussão entre vários deuses, tigres e outros animais da terra. Imita o som das vozes de cada um dos deuses e de cada animal. Quando finalmente faz uma pausa para descansar, pede a *Tercero* que termine a história.

O velho reclinou-se na rede, enquanto *Tercero* usa alternadamente as vozes continuando a história no ponto em que o pai tinha parado. Depois de alguns

minutos de discurso, o pai corrige-o — o jovem tinha-se esquecido de qualquer coisa. *Tercero* conta de novo a história, desde o princípio. O pai sorri. É difícil imaginar o velho Chan K'in a abandonar este mundo longínquo e embarcar num avião, como fez, há poucos anos, quando foi a Nova York para assistir a uma conferência indígena.

Chan K'in entristece quando começa a falar do actual momento de tumulto político no México. As parábolas seguintes falam de novo do fim do mundo. A conversa entre os deuses e os seres mortais recomeça. As suas personagens bebem *posol* e *balché*, uma cerveja de casca de árvore, e partilham *tamales*. Perde-se no meio da história e esquece-se de falar em espanhol, passando a discursar em dialecto lacandon, completamente incompreensível. As suas mulheres param de moer o milho e ouvem-no com atenção. As suas expressões tornam-se graves. "Em breve a Terra acabará", conclui ele, em espanhol. "E o último *mahogany* morrerá. Quantos anos faltam? Quem sabe? O *xu'tan*, o fim do mundo, está a chegar."

O seu filho surdo-mudo, Bob, entra na sala, vestido de maneira a imitar os soldados rebeldes zapatistas. O pai sorri, resignado. O rapaz, com cerca de vinte anos, inicia uma pantomima apaixonada, descrevendo claramente os combates de Janeiro de 1994, entre os zapatistas e o exército mexicano, e explicando muitas das histórias relacionadas que se seguiram depois. O pai abana a cabeça, enquanto Bob empunha armas invisíveis.

O pai torna a falar: "Quando eu era pequeno, havia paz. As montanhas e a floresta eram sagradas. Actualmente estão cheias de bandidos, e agora até de



Protegidos pelo governo, os Lacandons são dos poucos índios maias que conseguiram manter a identidade

zapatistas.” Diz que as exigências dos zapatistas são justas mas que aquela violência é um encorajamento para o fim do mundo. “Somos os filhos de Deus – seja qual for o local do planeta onde vivamos”, continua. “Deve ajudar-se todos os que precisarem. Todos devemos dar graças e oferecer presentes aos deuses. E é a cuidar uns dos outros que esses presentes são oferecidos, é assim que pagamos as nossas dívidas. Mas isto está a ser esquecido. É este o problema”, diz ele.

Fala de tempos melhores no México

e de um dia de 1970 em que o presidente Echeverría o foi visitar. “Echeverría era bom para nós, mas os outros presidentes nunca se interessaram nada com a existência dos Maias. Esta é uma altura má para nós.”

Quando interrogado sobre a controvérsia que rodeia a descendência dos Lacandons, *Tercero* levanta a voz, insistindo que o seu povo não descende de Cholos ou de Itzas, povos que imigraram para a região no século XVIII, tal como afirmam vários investigadores, como, por exemplo, o his-

toriador belga Jan de Voos: “Historicamente, estivemos sempre aqui. Somos os construtores de Palenque, Yaxchilán, Toniná e de outras civilizações que antes dominaram estas terras”, diz ele.

As mulheres de Chan K’in trazem vasilhas de milho fumegante, *posol*, pimentas verdes e *tortillas* frescas. Duas das suas mulheres morreram de velhice. Ele afirma que o segredo para manter as suas mulheres felizes é ler o futuro – e dizer-lhes sempre a verdade. “Elas sentem a paz no meu coração”, diz ele, sorrindo de novo. ►

► “Eu também podia ter várias mulheres”, diz *Tercero* depois de se ter despedido do pai. “Mas o custo de vida é tremendo, principalmente na cidade de Palenque.” O filho de *Tercero* frequenta a escola, em Palenque, e a sua mulher toma conta do pequeno apartamento. Ele diz que lhes ensinam o catecismo e as novas tradições na escola. E teme que esteja a perder as crenças dos seus antepassados.

Tercero caminha por uma vereda, entre a espessa floresta que se estende ainda por detrás da casa do velho, apontando as árvores *mahogany* que ainda existem. Um jovem, seu irmão, albino, também chamado Chan K'in, passeia ao seu lado, transportando um cacho de bananas que acabou de apanhar. *Tercero* desfolha algumas folhas de uma árvore fragrante. “Para curar os pesadelos e os temores esfrega-se isto no corpo”, diz. “E se forem esfregadas na pele de um bebé, evita que ele chore.”

Aponta outras plantas medicinais e caminha cuidadosamente ao redor de uma árvore, altamente tóxica, da qual escorre seiva. *Tercero* regressa pelo mesmo trilho, passa pelo local sagrado, a Casa dos Deuses, e vai descrevendo os antigos rituais lacandons.

Mais tarde, enquanto conduz de regresso a Palenque, vai recordando histórias da infância – “quando os pumas e os jaguares andavam por todo o lado”. E afirma que se esforça para manter vivas as tradições dos Lacandons, repetindo as velhas histórias às crianças.

A cinco milhas de Nahá, um grupo de jovens Tzeital, nus, dão banho a cavalos num charco. Os corpos castanhos dos cavalos e dos seus guardas brilham sob o sol quente dos trópicos. Os Lacandons partilham agora, relutantemente, a sua floresta

com muitos destes maias transplantados – a maior parte deles tzeitals e tsotzils. E é sobretudo destas tribos que são preenchidas as vagas nos exércitos zapatistas.

Ao contrário de outros grupos maias, os Lacandons, pelo menos em teoria, gozaram do respeito da elite mexicana durante décadas – em grande parte devido ao facto de o povo de Chan K'in ser olhado como uma curiosidade viva, o que garantiu à tribo uma autonomia invulgar entre os povos indígenas mexicanos. Habitados ao

idades vizinhas, terem acabado por se converter ao cristianismo.

As forças do povo de Chan K'in, no entanto, estão a fraquejar. Os jovens lacandons vivem longe dos seus territórios e, quando regressam, trazem com eles a vida moderna. Alguns, corrompidos pela influente indústria madeireira e pelos políticos gananciosos da região, desviam recursos e começam a esvaziar a comunidade a partir do seu interior.

A revolta zapatista também teve os

seus custos. Em busca dos rebeldes, dezenas de milhares de tropas do exército federal assentaram praça ali próximo. E a recente descoberta de petróleo na região é um claro indício de que mudanças ainda mais radicais se preparam. Os Lacandons ainda podem ser conquistados. Apesar de tudo, as marés da mudança podem também dirigir-se para o lado do bem. Em 1992, uma emenda ao artigo 4.º da Constituição do México garantiu aos povos indígenas da nação os direitos básicos concedidos aos outros mexicanos. Desde essa altura, um movimento crescente tem vindo a invadir o México, exigindo que essa emenda seja alargada e respeitada. Conversações de paz entre o governo e os za-



Os Lacandons foram ignorados pelos conquistadores espanhóis. Nem os os missionários os conseguiram converter

seu estatuto privilegiado, os Lacandons acostumaram-se a considerar os outros povos Maias como fonte de problemas e a verem os zapatistas como um exército abusador e interferente na sua história pacífica.

Entre os zapatistas armados e outros grupos indígenas descendentes dos Maias, conquistados e escravizados pelos Espanhóis, o grupo de Chan K'in é único – foi completamente ignorado na conquista das Américas. Nem os missionários espanhóis conseguiram converter os lacandons de Nahá, apesar de alguns destes, de comuni-

patistas apontam para um acordo concreto já no ano corrente – um acordo limitado sobre os direitos indígenas e a sua cultura, a primeira de seis propostas mais amplas que agora se encontram na mesa das negociações. Apesar de este acordo ser, provavelmente, difícil de garantir, pode ajudar a melhorar a vida dos povos indígenas que vivem no México. Sustentado, talvez ajude mesmo a diminuir ou a reverter a desintegração da comunidade lacandon. Ironicamente, a persistência zapatista pode até servir para ajudar os recursos dos Lacan-



**Um saco de milho às costas e uma catana com cabo de plástico.
Ou a tecnologia ao serviço da tradição**

dons, fortalecendo a posição política de todos os povos indígenas da nação.

Acima de tudo, a nova vaga activista dos índios do México pode ter uma influência positiva, levar a um virar de página crucial na história do México. A nação, para lá da soleira da porta de Chan K'in, está a mudar rapidamente.

Mais de cem livros e monografias foram escritos sobre Chan K'in e Nahá, desde que Alfred Tozzer, professor da Universidade de Harvard, fez a sua primeira visita a esta comunidade e sobre

ela escreveu, em 1902. A exploradora suíça Gertrude Duby Blom, uma conhecida fotojornalista, dedicou igualmente grande parte da sua vida ao estudo e à documentação da vida dos Lacandons, até à sua morte, em 1994. Uma longa-metragem realizada em 1970 mostrava também a vida de Chan K'in. Mas o velho homem manteve-se sempre estranhamente alheio aos círculos académicos, apesar do seu significado histórico.

Chan K'in jaz agora, enterrado, com a cabeça na direcção do ocidente, para

poder ver o nascer do Sol. A seu lado, encontra-se a bengala que o ajudava a caminhar, uma muda de roupa, um saco de alimentos e cigarros para a jornada até ao mundo espiritual. Falta ainda ver se o apocalipse chegará, quando o último *mahogany* desaparecer, como Chan K'in previa. Mas uma coisa é certa – agora que Chan K'in morreu, rompeu-se para sempre a última ligação pura à antiga civilização dos Maias. ■

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TALES FROM THE FOREST

By Catherine Ryan

Nahá, MEXICO—Old Chan K'in gently swings back and forth in his hammock, eyes closed, barely humming, puffing now and then on a cigar. His two wives stand nearby, softly chatting and laughing as they lean over hand-mills, working hard to grind corn kernels into tortilla flour. Their barefoot old husband holds a cigar in a gnarled, arthritic hand, and begins telling Maya stories about the creation of the world, and predictions for what he believes is a rapidly approaching apocalypse.

Some anthropologists believe that Old Chan K'in is the last of the *halach winik*, the great lords of the 3,500-year-old Olmec-Maya civilization. They say that this spiritual and traditional leader is therefore Lord of such famous, ancient ruins as Palenque, Tikal, Yaxchilán, Copán, Chichén Itzá and Mayapán, in Mexico and Central America. Claims to Old Chan K'in's exact heritage are controversial—some experts contend that he descends from traveling Chol or Itzá Indians of neighboring Guatemala, and not from the original Lacandons. But all Maya experts agree that Old Chan K'in is a cultural icon—a treasured relic of Mexico's pre-Hispanic heritage. At more than 100 years old, he is living history.

He appears to be a genuine wild man—with long unkempt hair—and he still wears the tribe's traditional, long white tunic. He serves as advisor to the band of 200 Lacandon Mayas remaining in the remote Chiapas jungle village of Nahá. He is a wily, poetic, reclusive old sage, living a long way from modern civilization.

women still wear the same white cotton shifts as Old Chan K'in—long dresses which were fashioned from tree bark in ancient times—and they still leave their hair long and just as wild. But in the past four years several young men at Palenque have taken to trimming their hair short, and many of them now change into Western clothes as soon as the selling day ends—before heading back to their nearby apartments.

A twelve-year-old Lacandon boy, Arturo Kayum II, is happy to show visitors around Palenque, and to recount in detail the old legends and history of the temple ruins. He's not an official tour guide, but an enthusiastic storyteller, nonetheless. Like the other Lacandons there, he seems proud, tranquil, and accustomed to foreigners gawking at his primitive appearance. His jet-black hair flows half-way down his back. The sight of him climbing the ancient, crumbling stairway of the famous Temple of the Inscriptions seems projected from another millennium, save for the Casio watch strapped to his wrist.

Thirty-five-year-old Chan K'in III, "Tercero", one of Old Chan K'in's 24 children, also sells curios at the ruins. Few visitors ask him about his father these days, but Tercero is willing to traverse the five hours of nearly impassable mountain road to his legendary father's house in his Volkswagen bus—for a \$100 fee. Without him—or without another guide—the community of Nahá is virtually impossible to find.

"We think my father is about 120," says Tercero, masterfully steering his vehicle toward Nahá through a particularly treacherous stretch of mud. "He was such a hard worker, until just a few years ago," he continues. "His corn field was beautifully cared for. But now he stays inside, and the women take care of him." He pauses for a moment, smiles, and then adds that his father has a new son, nearly two years old. "It seems the old man will never stop," he says, laughing. "He outdoes us all."

Tercero comments that he would like to develop an adventure-tourism business, regularly driving visitors from Palenque to his hometown. "I will take them to the lagoons at Nahá, to swim, then paddle them in a mahogany canoe to visit the crocodiles in another lake," he says enthusiastically.

"I'll introduce them to the Lacandons and our incense-burning ceremonies and *balché*-drinking, camping, and we can visit the other ruins, too." The biggest snag is the deeply rutted and washed-out road.

Tercero points to a lone ceiba tree, the Mayas' revered "tree of life", and begins to talk about the rapid decimation of the Lacandon rainforest. Miles of freshly-cut tree stumps fan out in all directions. Not long ago, this was all lush jungle. In 1972, the Mexican government deeded all this territory—more than 1.5 million acres—to the Lacandons, and designated much of it as a biological preserve.

But, in a later, controversial government deal finally approved by the Lacandons themselves, mahogany loggers invaded the region in 1978, removing most of the precious hardwoods. The loggers destroyed much of the jungle in their path. Pirate loggers moved in later to steal many of the remaining varieties of trees. Cattle ranchers, seeking new grazing territories, slashed-and-burned much of the already plundered land to clear it for their herds. Most of the once verdant hills and mountainsides leading to Nahá are now totally denuded.

Tercero remembers when the first logging tractor arrived in Nahá. "I was a teenager," he says. "We heard a loud noise like we had never heard before. We hid for three days. We had never even seen a car before. Finally my father told us we could come out. But when we saw the jaws of the tractor, we were sure it would eat us, as it ate the trees. It was terrifying." The loggers completed the dirt road into the jungle the following year. "Before then, if we went to Palenque, we walked for two weeks to get there," Tercero recalls.

"In those days we still regularly ate monkeys, iguanas, and other wild animals," he says, "But rarely do you find those creatures around here, now." Tercero is quiet for a few minutes. "My father says that the end of the world is near. He says many earthquakes will soon begin. And, since the forest has been cut down, it is raining less. It is all very sad. You will see. All the old prophecies are being fulfilled. We will all soon die."

Tercero parks the Volkswagen van near a large shed. The shed serves as Nahá's general store, selling a limited supply of canned food and dry goods. Tercero leads the way past it, up a winding path through banana trees and weeds toward his father's makeshift abode. Barefoot villagers, all dressed in native garb, come out to greet him along the way, and to ask if he'll transport their freshly-made bundles of bows and arrows to relatives working in Palenque. Few own vehicles, and rarely do visitors come this far.

Tercero points to a satellite dish set up amid the thatched-roof huts. "My father has had a television for two years," he explains, "But it broke right away. Everything electrical refuses to work here," he says, laughing, "Perhaps it wasn't meant to be." In 1990 electricity came to Nahá. Telephone wiring hasn't made it this far, though. He points out a small schoolroom. Last year the government sent a grade school teacher to Nahá for the first time, he says.

Old Chan K'in is napping in his bedroom hammock. One of his wives announces that visitors have come. While his father dresses, Tercero comments that the old man has survived so long by living in harmony with the earth, and by honoring Hachak'yum and the lesser gods with ceremonies.

The small old man finally shuffles into the kitchen, leaning on a cane, cheerfully shaking hands, grinning, and sitting in another nearby hammock. His black hair is barely graying, and his eyes are quick and direct. After brief formalities, he launches into the mystical realm of his legendary storytelling and dream prophecies. His first account is a complicated description of creation. Then he shifts into a discussion between various gods, and tigers and other animals of the earth. He takes on the voice of each god and animal. When he eventually pauses to rest, he asks Tercero to finish the story.

The old man lays back in his hammock as Tercero takes on the alternating voices, picking up where his father left off. A few minutes into his discourse, his father corrects him—the younger man left something out. Tercero retells the story completely. His father smiles. It is difficult to

imagine that Old Chan K'in stepped out of this far-removed world to board an airliner a few years ago, when he flew to New York to attend an indigenous conference.

Old Chan K'in saddens when he begins to speak of Mexico's current political turmoil. His next parables dwell on the end of the world. His conversations between the gods and the mortals resume. His characters drink *posol* and bark beer *balché* together, and share tamales. He loses himself in his story, forgetting to speak Spanish and spilling into native, unintelligible Lacandon instead. His wives stop grinding corn to listen, and their expressions grow grave. "Soon the land will all be taken," he concludes in Spanish, "And the last mahogany will die. How many years? Who knows how long? The *xu'tan*, the end of the world, is near."

A deaf-mute son, Bor, walks into the room, dressed to imitate the rebel Zapatista soldiers. His father smiles resignedly. The boy, perhaps nearing 20, begins a passionate pantomime, clearly depicting the January 1994 battles between the Zapatistas and the Mexican army, and explaining many related stories that have unfolded since. His father shakes his head as Bor brandishes invisible weapons.

His father begins to speak again. "When I was small, we lived in peace," he says. "The mountains and the jungle were sacred. Today they are full of bandits, and now even Zapatistas." He says that the Zapatistas' demands are just, but that violence encourages the end of the world. "We are all children of god—wherever we live on the planet," he continues. "I must help you, if you are in need of help. We must all give thanks, we must offer gifts to the gods, and by taking care of others we are giving these gifts and paying our debts. But this is being forgotten. That is the problem," he says.

He talks of better days in Mexico, and a day in the 1970's when then-President Echeverria paid him a visit. "Echeverria was good to us, but the other presidents haven't taken into account that the Mayas exist," he says. "It is a bad time for us."

When queried about the controversy surrounding the ancestry of the Lacandons, Tercero speaks up, insisting that his people are not descendants from Chols or Itzas who moved into the area in the 18th Century, as researchers such as the distinguished Belgian historian Jan de Vos are convinced. "Historically we have *always* been in the same place, and we are the builders of Palenque, Yaxchilán, Toniná, and the other civilizations that once ruled these lands," he says.

Old Chan K'in's wives bring over bowls of steaming corn *posol*, green chilies and fresh tortillas. Two of his wives have already died of old age. He says the secret to keeping his wives happy is his storytelling—and always telling them the truth. "They feel the peace and happiness of my heart," he says, smiling again.

.

"I could have several wives too," says Tercero after saying good-bye to his father. "But the *cost* these days is tremendous, especially in the town of Palenque." Tercero's children attend school in Palenque, and his wife takes care of their apartment. He says they are taught Christianity and new traditions in school. He fears that they are losing the beliefs of their ancestors.

Tercero walks up a path into the still-thick jungle just behind the old man's house, pointing out the few remaining mahogany trees. A younger, albino brother, also named Chan K'in, walks along beside him, carrying a bunch of bananas he's just picked. Tercero strips some leaves from a fragrant tree. "You rub these all over someone's body to cure them of bad dreams and fears," he says, "And if you rub it on a baby's skin, it will keep him from crying." He demonstrates other medicinal plants, and walks carefully around a tree with highly toxic, dripping sap. As Tercero returns along the path, he passes by the village's sacred God House ceremonial site, and describes the Lacandons' ancient rituals.

Later, driving home, he recalls stories from his childhood—"when cougars and jaguars were everywhere." He says he struggles to keep the Lacandons' traditions alive by repeating the old stories to his children.

A few miles out of Nahá, a group of naked young Tzeltal boys bathe horses in a pond. The brown bodies of horses and keepers shimmer under the hot, tropical sun. The Lacandons now reluctantly share their jungle with many such transplanted Mayas—mostly Tzeltals and Tsotzils. It is primarily from these tribes that the ranks of the rebel Zapatista Army are filled.

Unlike other Maya groups, the Lacandons have, at least in theory, enjoyed the respect of the Mexican elite for decades—in large part because Chan K'in's people are regarded as living curios. This has afforded the tribe an autonomy unusual for Mexico's indigenous peoples. Accustomed to their preferential status, the Lacandons generally consider other Mayas troublesome, and view the Zapatistas as an encroaching army, disruptive of their peaceful history.

Whereas the armed Zapatistas and other indigenous groups descend from Mayas conquered and enslaved by the Spaniards, Chan K'in's group is unique—it was completely bypassed by the conquest of the Americas. Even the virtual army of Spanish missionaries failed to convert the Lacandons of Nahá, although some Lacandons in neighboring communities eventually subscribed to Christianity.

But Chan K'in's people are weakening. The younger Lacandons are journeying far from their territories, and are returning with the makings of modernity. Some of Chan K'in's own people, corrupted by logging influences and local political graft, have diverted resources and drained the community from within. The Zapatista revolt has also taken its toll; in search of the rebels, tens of thousands of Federal Army troops have moved in nearby. And the recent discovery of petroleum in the area points to even-more radical changes to come. The Lacandons may yet be conquered.

But the tides of change may also be moving in a beneficial direction. In 1992, an amendment to Article Four of the Mexican Constitution granted the nation's indigenous peoples the basic rights afforded other Mexicans. Since then, a growing movement has swept Mexico, calling for that amendment to be broadened and respected. Peace talks between the government and the Zapatistas have netted one concrete agreement so far this year—a limited accord on indigenous

rights and culture, the first of six wide-ranging proposals now on the negotiating table. Although this agreement might prove difficult to guarantee, it may aid in improving the lives of indigenous peoples throughout Mexico if it is upheld—perhaps even helping to slow or reverse the disintegration of the Lacandon community. Ironically, the Zapatistas' persistence may serve to help even the resentful Lacandons, by strengthening the political position of all the nation's indigenous peoples.

Above all, not only in indigenous affairs but throughout the political spectrum, Mexico's new wave of indigenous activism may succeed in positively influencing a crucial turning point in Mexico's history. The nation outside Chan K'in's doorstep is changing fast.

More than 100 books and monographs have been written about Chan K'in and Nahá since Harvard professor Alfred Tozzer first visited and wrote about the community in 1902. Swiss explorer and renowned photojournalist Gertrude Duby Blom dedicated much of her life to the study and documentation of the lives of the Lacandons until her death in 1994, and a 1970s full-length feature film depicted Chan K'in's life. But the old man still remains oddly unknown beyond academic circles, despite his historical significance.

It remains to be seen if the apocalypse, the *xu'tan*, will come to pass when the last mahogany is felled, as Chan K'in predicts. But one thing is certain—when Chan K'in dies, the last pure link to the Mayas' ancient civilization will be forever severed.

—END—

LA Village

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PERIODISTA LOST



Catherine Ryan's Access to Rebel Leader Subcomandante Marcos Has Attracted the Attention of Hollywood—and the Wrath of the Mexican Government

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MEXICO

THE BLOODY ROAD TO DEMOCRACY

CATHERINE RYAN REPORTS FROM CHIAPAS

RECLAIMING THE REVOLUTION

Mexico's Indigenous Rebellion Has Shaken the Country to Its Foundation—and the Rumbling May Have Only Just Begun

BY CATHERINE RYAN

ZAPATA LIVES

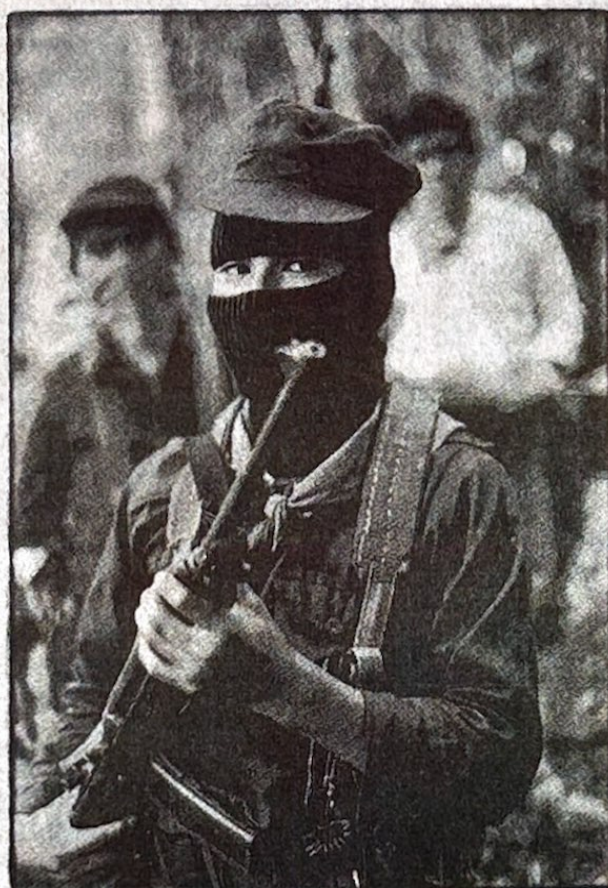
SAN CRISTÓBAL DE LAS CASAS, Mexico—Again, this morning, just before sunrise, the same dark figure scurried down the frigid, empty, narrow stone-paved streets of San Cristóbal. He furtively glanced around, then swiftly reached up and tacked a paper sign to the peeling wall of this ancient hotel. It read: "¡VIVA ZAPATA!" He slipped the remaining pages under his *serape* and vanished around the corner. Minutes later, the constantly patrolling, combat-clad, helmeted, AK-47-toting *federales* tore the poster down, crumpled it up, and tossed it to the gutter. Across from this window, on the opposite side of the street, the walls have been variously sanded, painted over, and even chipped away where a blood-red "¡VIVA EZLN!" is repeatedly repainted and then obliterated.

The streets in populated areas throughout this southernmost state of Chiapas and all over Mexico are filled with protesters and lined with political graffiti. The list of demands includes an end to notoriously corrupt elections and commonplace tortures and assassinations (490 professors, aspiring politicians, journalists, and indigenous leaders have been assassinated since the election of President Carlos Salinas de Gortari in 1988); the release of Mexico's thousands of political prisoners; the redistribution of wealth to the 61.9 percent of the population who live in "extreme poverty"; the recognition of indigenous rights; and, now, fulfillment of the battle cry of the rebel Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN)—effectively the realization of all of the above.

In this large, remote village of nearly 100,000, tucked away in the fertile but impoverished heights of the rugged sierras, the *federales* hurriedly try to remove all evidence of insurgency before it reaches the cameras and notepads of the 570 journalists who clog the streets around the municipal palace and neighboring cathedral. It was here, on New Year's Day, the day the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) went into effect, that the mostly indigenous Mayan Tzeltal "Zapatistas" launched their bloody uprising, first seizing control of this beautiful tourists' haven, and then storming, capturing, and for more than a week occupying five more highland cities and *pueblos*.

And it is here, during this tentative cease-fire, that swarms of military police now roam the streets. They form a continuous, 24-hour human barricade around the cathedral where three key figures—the mysterious hooded Zapatista known as *Subcomandante Marcos*; the bishop of San Cristóbal, Samuel Ruiz, who is considered sympathetic to the Zapatistas; and the commissioner for peace and reconciliation, Manuel Camacho Solís—have been meeting since Monday, February 21, in an attempt to reach a peaceful resolution to Mexico's political crisis.

The Zapatista representatives emerged from their mountain-jungle strongholds on Sunday, arriving in a San Cristóbal overcrowded with journalists, photographers, and peasants visiting from the surrounding countryside. All waited in uneasy anticipation for the rebels to arrive, pushing and shoving for hours to secure a good view of the road ahead. The guerrillas finally sped into the city, passing through the crowds and pulling up to the doors of the



Zapatista rebel in the Lacandona Jungle, February 1994

cathedral. Upon first spotting the caravan, a few peasants tentatively began to applaud, keeping a close eye on the notoriously repressive *federales*. After a few muffled shouts of "¡Viva Marcos!" and "¡Viva EZLN!" the sea of onlookers broke into an excited, spontaneous uproar of cheers and shouts of admiration and support. The scandalously light-skinned Marcos came forward; he was armed, hooded, with a bandolier of bullets across his chest and a heavy pack and gear. Mar-

cos, also known as "The Poet" for his eloquent manifestos, turned for a moment to wave to the crowd, and then, with *Comandante Ramona* and the rest of his envoy, passed immediately into the cathedral.

The surrounding streets were filled with a crush of curious spectators until well into early morning, but the Zapatistas did not reappear. Unarmed *federales* composed only the first ring of a tight security block around the city's central plaza and cathedral. A few feet inside their ranks,

hundreds of human-rights representatives from different organizations throughout Mexico, calling themselves *Conpaz*—meaning "with peace"—formed a second shield. Still another barricade, this one made up of Red Cross volunteers, formed a third circle of protection. The security cordon still surrounds the cathedral night and day, and the curious and mostly pro-EZLN *campesinos* continue to descend upon San Cristóbal.

Meanwhile, the dialogue continues. But there is little chance that the administration of Salinas de Gortari will satisfy the rebels' demands, because it is unlikely that Marcos, already a hero to many, and his army will accept anything less than a complete overhaul of the flagrantly corrupt nation that is Mexico. Because the world is watching, Marcos holds the cards. And it is the Mexican government, not Marcos, that is in a hurry to resolve this national emergency.

After more than a decade of planning, and through a combination of brilliant political strategy and perfect timing, the Zapatistas achieved in days a series of victories heretofore unattained by any such insurrection in this hemisphere. They captured and held six cities, including San Cristóbal—a city ten times as populated as any occupied in battle by the Nicaraguan Sandinistas. And, by coordinating their attack to coincide with the implementation of NAFTA, they managed to demolish twelve years of carefully built-up investor confidence, a confidence they expected would facilitate the foreign buy-up of Mexico. The rebels also ensured their own relative security by waiting until January 1, the day when the forces of power and influence in the North were looking to the South.

In short, the Zapatistas accomplished the unimaginable: they turned Mexican politics inside out and shook the very foundations of the repressive, six-decade-long hegemony of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). The Zapatistas have already succeeded in bringing about change within the president's cabinet, and this without trying. Although Salinas de Gortari has far from bowed to Marcos' demands for his resignation, on the eleventh day of the uprising, watching his NAFTA achievements slipping away, the president attempted to pacify the rebels by firing some of his key hard-line ministers, replacing them with liberals who enjoy more widespread respect. Because of the Zapatistas, Mexicans from the Yucatán to Jalisco, from Chihuahua to Chiapas, are for the first time in several generations talking seriously, and enthusiastically, about the potential downfall of the PRI.

The Zapatista rebellion is no mere "indigenous uprising," nor is the EZLN just a new version of the socialist and communist Third World guerrilla movements to which Latin America has long been accustomed. Ironically, what the Zapatistas call for is simply adherence to the principles upon which the Mexican Constitution was founded. There is the same battle for liberty,

democracy, and equality theoretically won by the triumphant heroes of the Mexican Revolution. And it is because their crusade is a "just war," a pro-democracy war, that they have captured the attention of all of Mexico and much of the world. Indeed, because of the perceived legitimacy of their demands, they may eventually succeed in bringing about dramatic political change here in Mexico.

What the Zapatistas call for is simply adherence to the principles upon which the Mexican Constitution was founded. There is the same battle for liberty, democracy, and equality theoretically won by the triumphant heroes of the Mexican Revolution. And it is because their crusade is a "just war," a pro-democracy war, that they have captured the attention of all of Mexico and much of the world.

With appeasement unlikely, the current cease-fire and daily dialogues could conceivably drag out until the presidential elections in August. But come August, even if the elections are clean, this fragile peace will likely shatter if the *campesinos* are the least bit displeased with Salinas de Gortari's successor. And if the elections are again perceived as fraudulent, then not only Chiapas, but all of this vast, fermenting, rugged nation, will likely explode.

The *campesinos* might not wait until August, however. And even if the PRI manages to negotiate a settlement with the Zapatistas in Chiapas, the current crisis will not be over. This entire country is ready to ignite. The state of Oaxaca, bordering Chiapas to the west, may well be the first to join the Zapatistas, or at least to follow their lead. Oaxaca is one of Mexico's poorest and most repressed states. It leads the nation in political assassinations. Fifty outspoken indigenous Triqui leaders, 40 *campesinos*, and more than 80 professors have been assassinated there since 1980. Repressed but never entirely silenced, numerous human-rights groups and political organizations have for years staged daily rallies in front of the state capital's municipal palace. As throughout Mexico, these groups are now taking advantage of the dramatically increased security recently afforded by the international spotlight that keeps the Mexican military in check. The rallies are growing in size and frequency, often bringing traffic to a standstill for hours as placard-waving crowds parade about, crisscrossing the capital city.

Tuesday, February 22, was one such day. The regular gathering of professors, protesting low pay, poor working conditions, jailings, tortures, and assassinations, camped out the night before with their flags, banners, and loudspeaker systems, just down the street from a contingent of several hundred *campesinos*. The *campesinos* were airing their many grievances and marching in support of their *hermanos*, their "brothers," in Chiapas. The peasant march was led by two *campesinos* carrying a banner painted with the image of the peasant hero of the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata. A group of students had been lodged in front of the state-government headquarters in the city's *zócalo*, or public square, for more than a month, but they folded up their banners and posters the evening before, temporarily stepping out of the limelight to make way for the others. The students, however, were still out in force, still protesting and chanting against injustice and corruption, this time just a block away.

Oaxaca's former archbishop, Bartolomé Carrasco Briseño, is one of many locals who say that *campesino* groups in the mountains of Oaxaca are armed and ready to rebel if land disputes are not quickly resolved. The land-dispute issue is one of the biggest among Mexico's *campesino* population and is one of the topics now being discussed by the Zapatistas and Camacho Solís in San Cristóbal. As part of the changes brought about to facilitate the implementation of NAFTA, Salinas de Gortari reshaped an article in the Mexican Constitution, permitting the sale to private interests of *ejido* property. Mexico's *ejidos*, communal *campesino* cooperatives, were instituted by the leaders of the Mexican Revolution when they granted community-property title to those who worked the land. Until now these properties could not be sold to private buyers, only to the Mexican government, and only with the permission of community leaders. While most *ejido* populations have long suffered under the exploitation and often heavy-handed rule of the wealthiest community chieftains, or *caciques*, the peasants at least knew that their land was relatively secure.

The *caciques* still retain authority over land sales, but now they are also allowed to sell to private interests. So the *campesinos* have good cause for alarm. With the majority of Mexicans already living in abject poverty, and often without the privileges of education, NAFTA—which many believe will mean the loss of their homes—is considered one straw too many.

"Salinas de Gortari has sold our country. Mexico will turn into one big, American maquiladora.... Without a switch to real democracy, without our own government's investment in our own land, we will lose this competition with the U.S."

—Miahuatlán Municipal Secretary Inocente Cortes García

THE ROAD TO SAN CRISTÓBAL

On February 11 in the Oaxacan city of Miahuatlán de Porfirio Díaz, located south of the capital amid infertile bean fields and once-forested, now barren hills, the municipal president looks worn, tired, and serious. Although part of the notoriously corrupt system, he's one of the "good guys," according to some protesters in the capital. "I look serious?" he asks. "Well, look around," he sighs, "what do you see? This isn't just poverty, this is misery. We're working hard in this town to raise

are for hunting, and they are relics from 1910. But the people are angry. Who knows what will happen here. All the *campesinos* in Mexico are ready to rise up."

I mention that I'm on my way to Chiapas. His eyes light up and his Spanish blurs as he speaks faster and faster. "Chiapas woke up the *campesinos*," he says. "Nobody has ever believed in the political parties. They are all corrupt, are all in some way controlled by PRI, or they would not be allowed to be parties. But now we are doing something about it. Before now, here and throughout much of Mexico, we have practiced resistance through abstinence. The people only vote for the municipal president. They refuse to participate in fraudulent elections."



Campesino with Zapata banner at rally in Oaxaca, February 22, 1994

our deplorably low standard of living. But we're running on empty. This is a lonely road. We receive no help, only hindrance." He thinks NAFTA is Mexico's only hope to *subir*, to lift up. His second-in-command, Municipal Secretary Inocente Cortes García, is younger, more hopeful, more talkative, and he doesn't agree with his superior about NAFTA. "Salinas de Gortari has sold our country. Mexico will turn into one big, American maquiladora," a production-line factory. "This country has long been owned by the *caciques*, the handful who control all the money and keep the rest of us in virtual serfdom. PRI is corrupt to the core. Without a switch to real democracy, without our own government's investment in our own land, we will lose this competition with the U.S. This land is burned out. It is no longer productive. We don't even have money for fertilizer, and we still till the fields by hand and by oxen. We have not advanced. We are not ready."

Then he speaks excitedly of the Zapatista uprising, and confirms that the *campesinos* of Oaxaca are ready for insurrection. Are they armed? "They are armed, but not necessarily for revolution. Their weapons

Cortes García wants to go to Chiapas too. The uprising here has been front-page news in every Mexican newspaper since January 1, usually taking up most of the paper. But he wants to see for himself. He convinces me to wait, and within days he's arranged for the vice president of the Mexican League for the Defense of Human Rights to fly out from Mexico City with credentials to escort us on the slow, day-and-a-half-long journey through twisting mountain ranges and numerous military roadblocks to San Cristóbal. The municipal secretary has also commandeered a large truck for the journey, and by the time we are ready to leave, hundreds of Miahuatlán residents, themselves barely eking out a subsistence living, have filled a corner of the city's marketplace with tons of donated rice, corn, beans, and sugar for their hungry *compañeros* in Chiapas. We load the truck and six of us set out for the "war zone": a progressive politician; an expert on human-rights violations; a charming, wrinkled-up peasant truck driver; the local schoolmaster; the secretary's able-bodied young assistant, Gabino; and a *gringa*.

We drive through the mountains of Chiapas, often waiting anxiously and inter-

minably while the *federales* search us and the truck, and then radio data from our credentials to faraway receiving stations. We sleep where we can—sometimes in the cottages of hospitable peasants, or on the lumpy bags heaped up in the back of the truck, or in facility-less "hotels" that would elsewhere be termed shacks. Visiting the towns and cities

taken by the rebels in the first days of the uprising, we see the machine-gun-riddled marketplaces and rocket-blasted villages in the heights of the mountains. We speak with stand-ins for municipal presidents whose bosses are conveniently still staying out of town, and we stay up late each night talking with residents who witnessed the "war" firsthand—some who saw the Zapatistas shoot local policemen, and others who watched local policemen and *federales* spray tied-up rebel prisoners with bullets.

In Ocosingo, a town about one hour from San Cristóbal, the public marketplace is pockmarked with bullet holes. The vendors have repaired their stalls and are again selling their wares. But they are afraid to talk. One woman selling fruit says that not too many people saw what happened. The sellers abandoned the market when the shooting began. But she saw everything. She knows the various spots where the Zapatistas were gunned down, but she won't show me—I'm a *gringa*, and the *federales* are watching. She takes Cortes García on an inconspicuous tour. Meanwhile, I pay 50 *centavos* to the man in charge of the filthy public restrooms. In the small, empty, dark women's room, I take my camera out of my pack. The walls and ceiling have been pierced by numerous bullets. The blood has been scrubbed off the concrete floor. Before I can take a photo of this documented massacre site, a guard comes in and pulls me out. "No!" he says. "The municipal president said no!"

In tiny, nearby Altamirano, the truck from Miahuatlán backs up to the municipal palace. The Zapatistas partially destroyed the building with fire and axes when they took the town. Hundreds of peasant refugees gather about, hoping for a handout. The town councilmen bring out lists of the names of those who continue to flee their bombed-out villages, seeking refuge in this town square. One by one they are each doled out a portion of the supplies from Miahuatlán. In the end there are extra sacks of rice and beans.

The mood in Altamirano is hostile. Not all these villages side with the rebels. This one doesn't. "No pictures," says the man who seems to be in charge. "*Guera*" (white girl) and "*Gringa*," hiss the filthy, barefoot dispossessed as I walk by. The refugees sit and mill about in the crowded town center; almost every young girl has a sister or brother wrapped up and strapped to her back, and usually another in tow.

Later in the afternoon the sombrero-wearing townsmen all seem noticeably and somehow oddly drunk. The town square reeks of alcohol. The *federales* lounge in the shade against adobe walls and watch from parapets on the roofs of a few houses. A group of six- and seven-year-old students, wearing the only clean clothes I've seen here, form an orderly parade line, carrying placards around the square. The placards praise the military and thank the *federales* for guarding their town. The owner of a dry-goods store says that many residents participate in these demonstrations because they fear being denounced as Zapatistas. Several armored tanks are parked nearby.

A truck full of university students from Mexico City, on their way to deliver food and clothing donations to the nearby *ejido* of Morelia, and a following caravan of reporters and photographers are halted by townsmen in front of the provisional municipal offices. An argument ensues, and the gathering crowd of locals force the students to unload their cargo. "Morelia sides with the Zapatistas," says the little mustachioed man disdainfully, who again seems to be in charge. The *federales* slink away to watch from afar, and the doors to the provisional municipal offices shut.

Now the mustachioed man has a megaphone. He's definitely trying

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In the small, empty, dark women's room, I take my camera out of my pack.... Before I can take a photo of this documented massacre site, a guard comes in and pulls me out. "No!" he says.

Zapatistas

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to make trouble. Dusk falls and then darkness, and the nervous students are still struggling to unload their many heavy sacks against the press of the crowd that hems them in. Now the onlookers begin chanting, accompanying the man with the megaphone, angrily and excitedly condemning the students for attempting to bring food to the neighboring community. "Don't take anything more to the Zapatistas," shouts the man with the mustache. "We are just as hungry as them. And we deserve more than them." (He doesn't mention that sacks of food are left over from this morning's delivery). Drunken townsmen suddenly jump on the hood of the truck and climb up and over the wood-slatted sides of the bed of the truck, grabbing the frightened students and frisking them, searching their backpacks and inside the cab for "arms on the way to the Zapatistas." None are found. My friends from Miahuatlán try to convince me to leave as I snap a few shots. "You're a *guera*, better get out." A few photographers are attacked and their cameras smashed. The mustachioed man shouts, this time at the men he's incited. "Enough," he says. Someone has phoned Camacho Solís, and the government negotiator intervenes via telephone to demand that the students be allowed safe passage out. The caravan finally leaves, with angry townsmen pressed up against the windows of the vehicles, a few locals still banging sticks against the hood and fenders of the truck.

Down an unlit side street, an aggressive peasant, speaking a mix of broken Spanish and one of the 20 indigenous local languages, pulls me aside and demands to know what I'm doing. No, I'm not taking photos. No, I'm not wandering around, I'm going back to my room. Yes, I'm the *guera* who came with the donation for his fellow refugees early this morning. He lets me pass.

The next day, while the group from Miahuatlán attends human-rights meetings in another town, Rodolfo Valtierra, the Mexican war photographer who's just returned from rebel hideouts in the jungle, suggests that we visit San Juan Chamula. We take a taxi to the tiny *pueblo*, which is inhabited only by indigenous people, and flash our Mexican press credentials to the *federals*, who wave us through. The town is almost deserted. Valtierra grabs my camera and stuffs it in his sack. We get out. The taxi waits. There are no cars, buses, or other taxis here.

A group of young girls immediately attacks me, pulling my hair to braid it from all sides. "*Un peso*," they plead, "*solo un peso*." Another group descends on Valtierra, tying hot-pink and sea-blue cloth belts around his waist and arms. "*Cinco*

pesos." Despite my shouts of protest, they continue to hang onto me, tying knots in my hair from all directions—and the pack of girls keeps growing in number. They're desperate. No tourists lately.

We frantically try to get away. Paying four pesos to get in, we take refuge in the huge, weathered cathedral, which has no priest. Our eyes adjust to the eerie space. A beat-up old cross—a double for the original—leans at an angle against the right-hand wall. Rings of tall, spindly candles are arbitrarily grouped here and there, stuck to the tiled floor, casting a ghostly, quivering glow on the tall walls, but not quite crawling up to the ceiling. There are no pews or chairs. Fresh green pine needles are strewn about. Old wooden saints in tall glass boxes lean up against all the walls, and the chanting of the believers, in their incomprehensible language, echoes and ricochets like something out of a bad dream. In a dark corner, a music box plays an obnoxiously tinny "Jingle Bells" over and over. So this is what conquered the Americas. A woman, hunched over on the floor, sacrifices a chicken. Other peasants are kneeling, heads bobbing up and down, the women sobbing and wailing. Presumably they have lost relatives in this bloody insurgency. Who's to know? No one speaks Spanish.

A dirty, ragged little boy leaves his mother and wanders over. "*Si*," he says, smiling. Good, someone does speak Spanish. But he answers "*si*" to everything. What is his name? He holds out his cupped hands. "*Si. Peso. Un peso*." Finally we leave this strange, dark mix of Catholicism and witchery. The girls lean up against the taxi, laughing and saying they will not let us in. But finally we manage to open the doors and escape.

MORNING IN CHIAPAS

Today, back in San Cristóbal, the sun has finally risen. Near the cathedral, outside the lines of military police, the peasants who are camped on the sidewalk are starting to wake. An indigenous woman pushes traditional, brightly colored cloth dolls up to my face. "Marcos," she says, "*Cinco pesos. Subcomandante Marcos*." She points out that she's sewn a tiny black ski mask onto the doll's face. Nearby, a small, gaunt, whiskery man leans against a column, just out of earshot of the guards. He speaks Spanish. He seems to know most of the peasants. Is he a Zapatista? He keeps looking away, toward the row of military police. "Who do you think we are?" he mumbles, barely motioning sideways, presumably pointing to the other peasants. "The other day you watched with your cameras while a handful of masks entered the church. But the Zapatistas are many, and we are everywhere." ■