Abstract


The aim of this dissertation is to investigate the construction of citizenship by a group of highland Mayas in Mexico. The ethnographic focus is on liberation theological Catholics in the Tzotzil-speaking municipality of San Pedro Chenalhó in highland Chiapas. Through their religious affiliation and their political association Las Abejas, the Pedrano Catholics form one of the important blocs of what is today a deeply factionalized municipality.

Fieldwork was carried out in two periods for a total of fourteen months in 1995 and 1996. Complementary work was conducted during a month-long visit in 1998. The fieldwork focused on the daily life, Sunday services and meetings of Pedrano Catholics. Informal interviews were also made with church members, catechists and other leaders.

The study shows how Pedrano Catholics are reinterpreting the signification of the poverty and suffering that all Pedranos hold is characteristic of their lives as indigenous peasants. The converts are creating a collective identity that transcends the ethnic group and defines them as part of a universal humanity. Simultaneously, through a “moral theology of suffering,” their poverty is defined as a distinguishing experience that is contrary to the will of God, and which brings them and other indigenous peasants closer to God and his grace. Evoking Christian ethics and international human rights regulations, the converts denounce their predicament and demand rights in a discourse directed at Mexican authorities as well as national and international civil society. Thereby, Pedrano Catholics have developed a form for exercising active citizenship in the Mexican nation-state.

This endeavor is found to be shaped by an ongoing concern among Pedranos: the construction of cohesive social collectivities that uphold alliances with patron deities for protection. The Catholic church groups and their confederate-like coordination on municipal level are structured similarly to the earlier *calpul* community in Chenalhó. Both levels of the Catholic community are also constituted as the entities by which the converts uphold an alliance with God that assures his guardian protection. Thus, while the Pedrano Catholic community is part of an escalating factionalization and disintegration of Chenalhó, it provides a space where Pedrano society can be reconstituted, offering a sense of coherence and unity. At the same time, the Catholic group is constituted as part of a broader community of Catholics, and recognizes clergy of the Catholic Church as religious and political authorities. Thus, it is argued that the Catholic group exemplifies a broad change in the Maya highlands, from “closed” corporate communities to translocal, moral communities.

*Keywords:* Maya, Chiapas, Tzotzil, Chenalhó, Las Abejas, Acteal, liberation theology, ethnicity, citizenship, indigenous peoples

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