The right of the Ch'ol children of Chiapas to live in peace in their territories

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the kinds of relationships that exist between the Indigenous children of two villages of Chiapas, Mexico, and their natural environments. Although both communities belong to the same (Ch'ol) ethnicity and are located at a short distance from each other, we observe significant differences between them, according to the organization of each community and to whether or not they are affiliated to the Zapatista movement. On one hand, the article presents the view of nature of these two communities, their relationship with productive activities, their ethics in relation to animals, and the stories of the oral tradition associated to beings whom they consider to be "keepers of the jungle."

Keywords: Indigenous children, rights, nature, territory.

Introduction

In 1994, the Zapatista National Liberation Army (*EZLN*) started an armed uprising in Mexico. The uprising generated a strong national and international mobilization that brought the war to an end after 12 days of military confrontation. The Zapatistas have been transforming their armed organization into a civil, political and social organization consisting of thousands of communities that are building an alternative project for social, political and cultural development based on an Indigenous rationale of respect for nature. The Lacandon jungle, as a territorial space in which the autonomous Zapatista process occurs, is also a geostrategic space for the Mexican Federal Government and multinational companies due to its enormous biodiversity and abundance of energy resources. For this reason, the military intelligence implemented a “low-intensity war” in order to weaken the social fabric at the community level through social, political, psychological and military mechanisms. These include the establishment of checkpoints, the organization of paramilitary groups, and forced displacements that clearly hurt Zapatista and non-Zapatista families of Chiapas alike.

The Ch’ol children who are the focus of this article, especially those who are members of Zapatista families, were born into this context and have grown up within it; their most basic rights to free access to education, health and food without the fear of being detained in a military checkpoint or on the way to their cornfield or to another village, have been violated in various ways. The right to play and to live in peace is also disrupted by the context of violence, even when such disruptions may occasionally be imperceptible. However, interestingly enough, despite this context, the Ch’ol peoples do not reproduce violence in their upbringing practices. They socialize their children into the notion of “respect for the other” especially the land to which they refer as “a mother that takes care of us and nourishes us.” This is related to Bolin’s findings (2006) in Peru where she reports a nurturing and tolerant family environment in which every individual is appreciated and lovingly cared for.

Ethnographic work and the analysis of drawings and interviews with Zapatista and non-Zapatista Ch'ol children have enabled us to review the relationship of these children with nature. In both communities, the presence of nature is inherent to community life, particularly in productive activities such as agriculture, and gathering and hunting of certain animals. When not threatened by the presence of soldiers, Ch'ol children grow up very freely; they run across the jungle, climb trees, swim in the river, and gather fruits and vegetables. However, they also have responsibilities within their community such as feeding and taking care of the poultry that are bred in their yards, as well as helping with the household chores and with the work in the family cornfield.

In order to address the relationship of Indigenous children to nature, it is important to know the bonds of the Indigenous peoples with "mother earth." When the members of an Indigenous family make reference to their land, they speak not of their own cornfield or of their yard but of the territory of their community. For them, the rivers, the mountains and the caves are the symbolic spaces where the owners and keepers of the land live and, from this perspective, they educate their children in the care of nature.

The territory is the space where the social organization of the native peoples is collectively built; it is where people establish their material and symbolic space. It is also where the collective memory resides, and therefore it harbors the symbolic referent of the community's identity (Giménez 1998:52).

The territory is also landscape, aesthetic beauty, symbols and myths that lead to building identities through elements of appropriation by the agents, who perceive a sense of belonging and of loyalty to their territory –a socio-territorial identity determined from within the family space; it is the result of the symbolic and/or instrumental appropriation by human groups (Giménez 1998:3).

The right of Indigenous peoples to the lands, territories and resources that they have traditionally owned has been internationally recognized in several documents according to which, from immemorial times, there has been a close relationship with

the earth that “must be recognized and understood as the core foundation of their cultures, their spiritual life, their integrity and their economic survival” (United Nations Organization, 2013:6).

The relationship between earth and people is inseparable from the point of view of the Indigenous rationale; the socio-affective relationships established by the children with “Mother Earth” are an essential part of this teaching-learning process, as are the dreams, intuition and other forms of access to knowledge that are underrated by Western thought.

Children and their right to their territory

There is an intimate bond between the children and the environments in which they grow, the earth on which they live, the water that they drink, and the air that they breathe. These all have a significant impact on their development and health. Therefore, it is necessary to reflect on the physical environment in which children thrive within the framework of the rights that are related to it. In this article, we argue that the political processes in which children are living mediate the Ch'ol children's view of nature. In the testimonies of the Zapatista children, their perception of nature is closely linked to their survival and their identity, a situation that does not appear in the testimonies of those children who are not affiliated with the Zapatista movement.

While there is in no specific article in the Convention on the Rights of Children (CRC) that decrees the right of children to live in peace in their territories, Article 30 mentions the right of Indigenous children to enjoy their own culture, religion and language; it never refers to their land. However, and because the communities of Zapatista children are under harassment, the CRC refers to the right to survival (to life, health and nutrition (Article 6)) and to the right to protection and to consideration of the best interest of the child (Art. 3). In both articles, children must have a way of life that allows them a minimum standard of health, play and recreation, as well as living conditions that may ensure them a dignified life.

Moreover, article 12 is important to consider as it deals with the rights to participate in all those activities that may be relevant to children's development. In

the last three decades, there has been an entire movement that promotes the inclusion of children in the formulation of the public policies that affect them (Bartlett and Hart 2002, Corona and Gulgönen 2016), but rarely includes Indigenous children. Although Mexico signed and ratified the CRC, the Mexican government has not prioritized the safety and well being of Indigenous children (Schmelkes 2013, Smith 2007, UNICEF 2017) or their right to participate. This neglect of rights exposes these children to violence, poverty, discrimination and racism. The continuous attacks on their communities force their families to leave their territories and go in search of new places to settle. Under these situations, it is very difficult for children to have an adequate standard of living and a safe relationship with nature.

In terms of the right to participate, the children interviewed in the present study express very clearly the situations they face when someone is willing to hear them. However, there is not much willingness on the part of the government to listen to Indigenous children or to take their views into account. Given the lack of theorizing to explain the political experiences of these children in relation to nature and to their territory, ethnographic reports are included herein to give voice to their opinions and needs. Children's testimonies may help render the violations of their rights more visible.

Cultural differences play a major role in the development of notions and concepts and in the practices that children learn. These reference frameworks provide children with specific principles that help them give meaning to their experiences in nature and to develop a set of beliefs about the relevant issues to which adults must pay attention. This is precisely the situation with the two Ch'ol communities in this study; that is, despite sharing a certain worldview, they differ enormously in their political and organizational stances.

Methodology

Understanding social relationships has much to do with the manner in which space is represented. According to Boaventura De Sousa-Santos (1991, p. 19–20),

“the way in which we imagine the spatial reality can become the matrix of the references by which we imagine all other aspects of reality” because space “confers a materiality of its own to the social relationships that take place within it.” This proposal is particularly important when speaking of the methodology followed in the course of this research to assess Ch’ol children’s views of the spaces that surround them, particularly of nature.

In this article, we present the results of three research experiences articulated around the analysis of Ch’ol Indigenous children and their relationship with nature in two communities of Chiapas. Two of these experiences are part of a collaborative project carried out over more than 15 years with children and their families.¹ The third experience involves children who participate in a small community library in one of these villages where the authors participate with the maintenance of the space and the promotion of activities with cultural relevance. In this experience, children made an artisanal hand-bound cardboard book called “Libro Cartonero.” This book is a compilation of drawings made by the children and bound in cardboard covers that were hand-illustrated by the children themselves. The instructions given to children at different time during the research were to draw about their home, school, community and nature. These three experiences have in common the interest in the use of drawings and interviews as methodological devices (Agamben, 2011, Medina and Martínez 2016) that can trigger a dialogical research process (Alejos, 2012). Our work was also based on horizontal methodologies (Corona, Berkin and Kaltmeir, 2012) and participatory drawing (Literat, 2013). The total number of children interviewed for this project was 29 (16 boys and 13 girls) from 5 to 12 years of age.

Participatory drawings are a privileged method for gathering information in research with children. It was an activity enjoyed by all of them and which does not cause resistance or tension. Importantly, the images that they chose to show can be considered to mirror a variety of emotions and thoughts. Through their drawings, the children attempt to reveal an essential aspect of reality; their descriptions allow us to

¹We chose the drawings related to nature in these two works, which were part of the Master and PhD studies of these authors. See Rico Montoya, 2012, 2018, Núñez Patiño, 2005, 2018).

observe their conceptual understanding as well as the emotional and/or expressive aspects that they build upon through their experiences. The symbols that they chose to show us makes visible what to them is the face of reality. In this case, they enable an understanding of what they understand by nature or by “mother earth”, on one hand and the phenomena associated to their territory and their environment, on the other. Thomas & Sil, (1990) argue that drawings are to be regarded as a “window” onto the children’s subjectivity because “they reflect an image of their own mind.”

The interpretations of the drawings and interviews are closely based on the children’s testimonies and understanding their discourse and symbolic representations. They are a way of exploring children’s views of their surroundings, as well as of the problems they face in the reality in which they live. Extensive historical-ethnographic work of the community contexts that has been done in these two Indigenous towns for more than 15 years supports the analysis, as well as the long-standing relationship with the children and their families.

Brief description of the communities

The Ch’ol communities are located in two nearby areas: Bajlum, in the Lacandon jungle, and the Bascanes or the Tulijá Valley. The Lacandon jungle is located in eastern Chiapas. It is rich in natural and energy resources such as oil, uranium, water, and natural gas and it is one of the regions with the greatest biodiversity in the world. A single hectare of this rainforest can harbor 160 species of vascular plants and up to 7,000 tree species. Due to its ecosystem, it is the area with the greatest biodiversity in the North American tropics.

The Bascanes area has been called thus by the people of the communities of the banks of the Bascán river due to the importance of this huge river for their activities. “Bajlum” is a community with Zapatista presence. It is located in the ravines of Palenque with a high biodiversity and is rich in bioenergetic resources. “Lucha Bascán”, as it is named by its inhabitants, is located in the official municipality of Salto de Agua. It is also rich in resources, but, having no Zapatista support base, it lacks the Zapatista autonomous structure.

The Ch'ol people call themselves "men made of corn"; their worldview explains their existence as centered on corn, a sacred food given to them by the gods. They settled in the Lacandon jungle in the 1940s. Their economy revolves around polyculture, the *milpa* (fields sown with corn, beans, hot peppers and squash). It has coffee plantations, vegetables, sugar cane and bovine cattle. Women also breed pigs and poultry in their house yards.

The people of these two communities have different types of relationships with nature. For this research, to work "well" implies an ethical framework of relationship with the natural environment, through the rituals of sowing, the healing practices, and with the supernatural realm of the "lords, keepers or gods" of water, of the animals, of the mountains, as well as with the network of social appurtenances; thus, disease implies a conflict between the supernatural beings and the people of the community. This ethical framework is expressed in being a *wiñik* (man) or an *ixik* (woman) *ch'ol*, an *i ch'ujlel* (one who has a soul), and it is gradually disrupted as the differentiation becomes more visible, with the distinctions generated by the individualistic consumer society, which produces greater inequality.

One feature that differentiates these two communities is religion. In the Zapatista community of Bajlum, there is only one Catholic church whereas in Lucha Bascán, Catholicism has been displaced by a variety of Christian churches such as the Pentecostal, the Presbyterian, and the Adventist. It should be noted that these religions had coexisted in the past with various Mesoamerican ritual and religious practices such as the Cornfield and Mother Earth feasts, the festivals of sacred sites -springs and natural pools, caves or mountains-- and the healing rituals. Religious syncretism has been reproduced from generation to generation so that from an early age, children participate in rituals and religious ceremonies.

However, in El Bascán, non-Catholic Christian religions have repressed these ritual practices in different ways, through hostilities ranging from negative comments addressed to traditional healers, to violent persecution accusing them of being witches and performing devilish acts. Rituals are now becoming less frequent and are carried out in the private space of very few families.

What is nature in the eyes of Ch'ol children?

Children know a lot about nature and about how to live together with nature. They care for it and love it; evidently, the knowledge that they acquire within their families is for their survival, not in their adult lives but in their childhood. For the Zapatista children (all of them from Bajlum), the earth is a mother that takes care of them, gives them joy, feeds them and keeps the remains of their dead. It is part of their identity, as shown by the following testimonies by Josefina and Sebastián.

Figure 1. “This could be anywhere”

“She takes care of us, feeds us and protects us. When I feel sad, I go up the mountain, and I know that I will not come to any harm” (Josefina, 12 years).

“Without the earth, the land, we are nothing; we are neither indigenous nor Zapatistas (Sebastián, 11 years).

Freddy's drawing also refers to the protective aspect of the earth and emphasizes families' responsibility to defend the land as a form of reciprocity toward it.

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The land is very important for my family; my grand-parents sought it when they left the ranches. That is why we take care of it –it is our responsibility: it takes care of us, and we take care of it. There are families that have a weapon; they take care of their territory, of the animals, of the front part of their homes, of the deer, of the rivers: they don't pollute at all.

José, on the other hand, explicitly claims that they have a right to the land and therefore must defend it so as to keep it from being polluted, burnt or otherwise hurt.

Figure 2: "Defending their right"

"There is a movement; they are defending their land, their right, their soil, their water, their trees, their animals, their rivers. There are families that are ready to face anything, should the enemy come close; the families decide to defend their home, to keep the people of the government from coming to pollute, to burn, to hurt mother earth." (José, 12 years, 2015).

When Zapatista children were asked if they were afraid or not of the soldiers, they said that they were afraid but that, "we are more afraid to lose our Mother Earth." To lose it would amount to losing their history and their identity as an Indigenous people. Therefore, the children noted that they are more afraid of losing it rather than facing the aggressions of the soldiers or the paramilitary. Petul, who was eight years old when he witnessed the murder of his father by the paramilitaries, shows the commitment to fight for their land whenever possible (Rico, 2018).

“The paramilitary took our lands; we are no longer at ease. When I grow up I am going to recover them” (Petul, 11 years, 2016).

On the other hand, for the children of Lucha Bascán, the land and nature do not have such a profound meaning. The families of this community depend on the aid they receive from governmental projects. They privilege learning at official schools and are completely alienated from their traditions by Protestant religions. Consequently, neither the children nor their families are aware of the dispossession of the territories or of their traditional knowledge. In this community, what is promoted as an alternative life project is migration, in order to finish their studies, in the best of cases, or to get a job in the services area of the touristic cities of the south of the country, such as Cancún or Playa del Carmen.

Most of the drawings and testimonies by these children depict various elements of nature. Unlike Zapatista children, the children in this study never speak about nature as linked to their identities or about the need to protect or fight for their land.

Figure 3. “My community”

My name is Abel Francisco Méndez; I am 12 years old, and there are ducks, grass, and highways with cars. And we are very happy and we hold feasts, we eat bread and we are happy all together (2017).

Figure 4 “My community”

“My name is Jesús Nicolás. I drew my community with houses, trees and animals. In my community we celebrate the feast of corn, of water, and mothers’ day. For the corn feast, they hold a small celebration at the churches; they eat boiled corn on the cob and they kill chickens. They celebrate mothers’ day, each at their church, and sometimes also at school there is a children’s day celebration, and the teachers bring sweets, *piñatas* and cake” (2017).

Although the two communities are relatively close to each other, considering the large distances in the Lacandon jungle, they are approximately 3 or 4 hours apart; both communities are Ch’ol. We can see that the political context of the community organization inevitably makes a difference in the appreciation of nature.

Nature and productive activities

Another aspect of nature mentioned by the children is that it is a source of nourishment for their families, always related to work on the cornfield. For example, Francisco represents a large group of people that includes children as the ones who sow the collective crops.

Figure 5. "Collective cornfield"

In my drawing, there are people working on their cornfield, weeding, and picking corn ears, squashes and chayote to eat. There are rivers, trees, a mountain, and water for swimming. Collective cornfield: we sow corn because that is our sustenance, for the *waj* (tortilla), for *atole*. We are lassoing a cow; a boy takes care of his pasture and brings his *wacax* (*vacas*, cows) there to graze; another person looks from afar (Francisco, 10 years, 2015).

For her part, Gabriela depicts her ideal home in a landscape teeming with plants and animals.

Figure 6. "The corn is all grown"

The corn is all grown; there is a rooster, a hen, a house, flowers. It is dawn, there is a sun in the middle of the drawing. There are Zapatista families watering the flowers behind their home. This is how I want to live in my community, at ease, sowing

my corn, with my trees, my tin house (Gabriela, 8 years, 2015).

The drawings and the children's narratives on collaboration offer insight into the process of reflection based on the Zapatista resistance: we are told that there is a "collective cornfield; we sow corn because it is our sustenance, for the *waj* (tortilla), for *atole*". Although other work practices, such as pastures are being introduced, the cornfield continues to be essential for food self-sufficiency, the construction of autonomy and the defense of the territory.

However, from the perspective of other non-Zapatista community contexts, as in Lucha Bascán, the strength of collaboration around work in the cornfield is well expressed in Jesús Nicolás's drawing about his house. In this case, the cornfield has been displaced by the school and the pasture that have been superimposed on it so that it is not even named. Jesús Nicolás tells us: "Also, my mother always cooks [...] whenever I go buy ten eggs, she always cooks them; if we go to the pasture to pick corn ears —lots of corn ears to make *atol*— we also pick more, for bean tortillas". He makes reference to the pasture, not to the cornfield, although they sow and harvest corn at the pasture; yet they do not work in it on an everyday basis but only very sporadically.

Figure 7. "So we go to the pasture to pick corn ears—lots of corn ears— to make *atol*."

A house with windows and doors, a tin roof, two mountains, and these are pencils; there is no one at my home (what do you like to do?) to draw (what else?) just that. (Jesús Nicolás, aged 6 years, 2016, Lucha Bascán).

These children's testimonies about nature and the productive activities force us, as Zemelman (1997) points out, to reformulate the concept of the social subject in the configuration of collective identities. For these cultural practices around work in the cornfield are based on the strength of the relationship that stimulates

collaboration and are anchored in “need and experience,” two elements that connect the common property of the land and the crops with the relationship with nature.

The importance of caring for nature

In the description of his drawing, Pascual depicts a landscape that can only be seen from inside the Lacandon jungle, a virgin territory with little human presence. The boy explains that the whole jungle used to be like this because his Mayan grandparents knew how to take good care of it: “they asked for forgiveness if they hurt the Earth”; but, he says, now this is no longer done. One of the concerns of the Zapatistas is the use of agrochemicals promoted by government projects, because, although in some ways they make the farmers’ work easier, in the long run they destroy the earth and the land; hence, Zapatista families, like Freddy’s, choose to sow in the traditional manner.

Figure 8. “Somewhere in the jungle”.

Somewhere in the jungle, there is a river, a waterfall; there are fish, animals, ducks, squirrels and pigeons flying above the trees on the mountains. The most beautiful thing, further on the mountain, is that it is not

polluted. There are large trees, jaguars, squirrels, deer, raccoons, flying ducks and trees around the river. This is how the land of our ancestors used to be. In the old days, the Mayan elders used to take care of their land, of their trees, their rivers; they asked for forgiveness if they hurt the earth. This is no longer done; we no longer take good care of the earth; we put garbage on it, we use agrochemicals —well, not my dad, or me: we grow our crops naturally (Freddy, Zapatista boy, 12 years, 2015).

Figure 9. "My community"

My village: the houses of my village and the mountains and the trees and the fruit-bearing shrubs, the mango trees, the orange and lime trees... I drew the land in each pasture, [...] there are shops [...] there are houses [...] sometimes they can be rented, when relatives come from every *ejido*; they can get together with other people [...] it is beautiful; there are birds, rivers, there are fish in the river, and the animals walk along the streets (Sandra, 2016, Lucha Bascán)

We observe a clear contrast in the drawings by the children of these two communities as a result of the political processes to which they, along with their families, are affiliated: one is the Zapatista process and the other is dependency on government programs which give shape to various subjectifications (Rico, 2018) and identity-formation processes (Núñez, 2018). Zapatista education and autonomy allow children to know their rights and build a political subjectivity by reflecting critically on their role in the care and defense of their territory as active members of their community and against the counterinsurgency. As Amador states, subjectivity is understood as "the space where the transformations and reflection processes of political action are manifested [...] as well as feelings, thoughts and the projection of the future, based on what has been experienced" (2012:215). In this sense, Zapatista's children have been able to take a critical view about the events that surround them (Echeverría and Luna, 2016: 18).

The drawings of the Ch'ol children of these communities also show an intense persistence of this everyday relationship with nature, although the official

school exerts a greater influence on Lucha Bascán, where schooling is seen as the only choice for a life project.

Ethical aspects in the relationship with animals

When you walk around with the children, they treat you like one of them. They explain everything to you - how to walk in the mud, how to recognize the plants and what their uses are. They tell you the names of all the animals in Ch'ol and Spanish and they make you repeat them. They also explain how the animals communicate between themselves and they even teach you how to recognize their footprints. They say that those who know how to identify these prints can know if the animal is a male or a female, young or fully grown.

For Zapatista children, it is essential to know how to identify animal footprints, for, as Enrique (aged 11) says, it is important to take good care of the jungle animals. For this reason only adult males can be hunted.

If by mistake someone kills a female with offspring, the hunters have to ask for forgiveness, make an offering to the mountain and take care of the offspring until they are adult and can survive by themselves (Beto, 12 years). We children are in charge of these offspring; we feed them, we bathe them, we grow with them until they are fit to survive by themselves; then we give them back to Mother Earth" (Jorge, 11 years).

Also, one must not hunt mantled howler monkeys because they have the task of calling the rains with their voice (Juanito, 12 years).

This knowledge is part of the ethical values regarding the relationship with nature that the children incorporate from an early age in their learning, through legends and practices that enable them to recognize their environment.

The children of Bascán also have many anecdotes about nature. Yahir (12 years), Abel (10 years), Marco Aurelio (6 years) and Servando (11 years) shared with us their knowledge regarding snakes, one of the animals that most fear and arouse interest in the children of the jungle. Abel translated into Spanish for us the story told by Servando in Ch'ol:

Servando's house is close to the pasture; there is a river. Yesterday he was frightened by a *nauyaca* (terciopelo snake) when he went out to use the toilet. He says all snakes are different (Abel, 10 years, 2017).

The other children ratified Servando's notion that all snakes are different; they differ not only in the colors and patterns of their skin but also in their behaviour, their way of attacking and their way of feeding, all of which are unique.

"It is true, the *nauyaca* climbs trees," Servando confirmed. "The coral snake is red, with black and yellow; it buries itself in the ground", said Abel, and Yahir told us that their parents taught them from a very early age that they have to guard themselves from the snakes when they go to the cornfield."

Another animal that causes fear among the communities is the crocodile.

When my dad killed a crocodile with his rifle, the bullet just wouldn't go in; he shot it 8 times in the head and still it didn't die, until at last my father could be safe from that animal. Later they ate the crocodile. They say that if you kill it and don't eat it, then your life shortens, you die before your time; that is why people eat the animal, so that they can live a full-length life (story by Servando in Ch'ol, translated into Spanish by Abel, Lucha Bascán, December, 2017).

This idea regarding the hunting of animals to which Servando refers in his testimony is very important: "if you kill it but don't eat it, it is said that your life is shortened by a few years". The animals that are hunted in the jungle must be hunted for food, to feed one's family; they are not to be killed for fun, for business or for sport as is often done in certain places. The adults teach this to their children by saying that if you do not eat the animal you kill, your life will be shortened.

Yesterday they killed a large iguana, and soon they will be coming to eat it (Servando, Lucha Bascán, December, 2017). When it is their season, we can also hunt birds with the rubber (Marco Aurelio, Lucha Bascán, December, 2017).

Another very interesting idea that may be observed in healing rituals in which the patient is required to eat the animals used in them is that the person who eats the animal acquires some of its characteristics, such as strength, cunning, and swiftness.

What Ch'ol children learn about nature is not for their future but for living and surviving in the present. In order to live and survive in the jungle and to learn how to relate to it, the children need to learn, from an early age, how to take care of themselves, how to walk on the mountain, how to find and use medicinal and edible plants, and how to fish and set traps. As Xap, a Zapatista boy aged 10 years explains:

All of us children go with our rubber (slingshot) to hunt for birds; we come back home with two or three birds each; we then broil them and eat them with chili sauce and freshly made *tortillas*. Our mothers were happy because we brought *tibal* (meat) (he says, thrilled). We eat the fish that we catch, the birds that we hunt, the fruits that we gather. My sister Juana (aged 17 years), as soon as she is done making *tortillas*, goes fishing for breams; she learned all by herself, just by looking (Xap, aged 10 years, Bajlum, 2016).

When the children go with their parents to the cornfield, they acquire not only knowledge for their survival but also a creative and playful experience; they learn how to recognize the plants offered by their habitat; they learn how to fell trees, how to make traps to hunt animals or how to protect their cornfields from the animals, and therefore they must learn how each species lives, how it reproduces, how it moves, where it sleeps, its route of access to the cornfield, its tastes and its fears. When the children go to the cornfield, they acquire important knowledge for the production and reproduction of the domestic unit.

However, there is an ongoing and increasing dispossession of territories, of the relationships of learning through collaboration and of the knowledge acquired thereby. In the case of the children of Lucha Bascán, the everyday activity of walking across the community and through the jungle in order to gain a deep knowledge of its wealth has been lost within a short time. Also lost is the sense of the importance of cultivating relationships of respect and reciprocity that used to be favoured by the rituals formerly practiced in nature. Today, this relationship is very limited because many families in Lucha Bascán consider school to be more important; that is, the only choice for a life project, and their lives are ruled by the views of the Protestant churches, which in subtle ways, forbid the rituals dedicated

to natural beings like “the spring”, and stigmatize those who publicly specialize in these rituals as practitioners of witchcraft.

The practices of religious festivals also have the characteristic of a gradual learning that is not compulsory. Children are always present at them, and they are not forced to show any particular behaviour. They approach these activities without being forced to do so. Instead, a gradual integration is sought by allowing them to participate in the activities of the adults, during which they find an occasion to play together with other children.

Oral tradition stories associated with nature

The knowledge that children build in relation to nature is also part of the ethical values that they incorporate into their learning from an early age, through narratives and practices that enable them to recognize their environment. As they grow, this knowledge allows them to endorse and recognize the values and norms through which their communities seek to protect their habitat. The teachings on the territory imparted by Zapatista parents to their children are filled with stories that are transmitted through their oral culture, from generation to generation (Rico, 2018).

In this sense, there are stories about the keepers of the jungle, the *Yawalwitz*, *Sombrerón* and *Tensún*, which the Zapatista children shared with us. These mythical creatures can “cause people to go crazy.” They can freeze in their caves those who show no respect for the earth, or they can cause them to lose their way. The care for “Mother Earth” is taught to children in a magical way, reinforcing the community forms and rules, without any imposition. Through these social imageries, the community establishes a symbolic order that ensures their continuity and their reproduction (Rico Montoya, 2007).

Sombrerón is a spirit of the mountain who amuses himself by causing men to lose their way and by teasing women; this elf is small, black, and wears a big hat; his footprints are like those of human feet, but backwards. *Sombrerón* takes care of “Mother Earth”; he only frightens those who are disrespectful of it: those who burn it; those who use chemicals, because by doing this they

deprive the animals of their food, and also those who kill a female animal or an offspring and fail to give an offering (Juanito, interview, 2015).

In the first part of his story, Juanito describes *Sombrerón* with the intention of causing fear; in the second part, he explains the ethics of the Zapatista villages that reinforce their economic resistance by refusing to use agrochemicals and by safeguarding the food sovereignty of their communities.

A variation of this story of *Sombrerón* can be found among the children of Lucha Bascán who do not give him this name but describe him as a small elf that walks backwards and who only takes away those children who go out in the night by themselves and cannot be found. Thus, according to a very brief narrative by Saúl, aged 11 years: “there are elves who kidnap the children that go out by themselves during the night”. This story is complemented by the mother of one of the children: “These elves are deceitful; but there is a secret: they confound the people as to the direction in which they take the children by walking backwards, so if one knows the secret, one is able to find the kidnapped children.” Both stories about the keepers of the jungle, the *yawalwitz*, teach the children respect for their territory.

Other footprints observed by the children are those of the *chulel*, which is the name given to the animal soul/companion of certain men and women with power; these footprints are larger, because they belong to sacred and very intelligent animals. If you make a mistake or chase them believing them to be an ordinary animal, you can lose your way, fall down or be punished. The relationship between a *chulel* and the person is symbiotic; they have a similar character; if one of them dies, the other also dies; they coexist, but they do so in parallel worlds.

Juanito, aged 12 years, explained:

“You must never say what your *chulel* is, because a powerful enemy could hunt your *chulel* in order to kill you. But the *chulel* is not only a large animal, it can also be a butterfly, or the wind, rain or thunder... When you are born, the midwife places you on the earth so that you may meet “Mother Earth”; then, the earth becomes imprinted with the footprint or the shape of you *chulel*. I have a *chulel*; my grandmother told me what it is and how I have to take care

of it and how I must care for my body so that it may be in good health. My *chulel* protects me from danger” (Juanito, Bajlum 2016).

In Lucha Bascán, there are also variations of this *chulel* to whom they give the Ch'ol name of *wäy*. What is special about this *wäy* is that it is a “gift” that not everyone has. It comes with birth or can be inherited at birth from the parents or grandparents who have it. It can also be developed through a learning process in one's dreams. *Wäys* are considered to be very powerful and they follow a hierarchy according to which the *bajlum* (jaguar) is the most powerful. Those who undertake the task of strengthening their *wäy* must undergo several trials imposed on them by the “lords–gods.” The *wäys* live on the mountains, in the jungle, in the rivers, in a parallel world in which dreams are a central communication pathway between people.

On the other hand, the *ch'ujlel* is the soul that every Ch'ol person has, and it responds to this ethical framework of what ought to be. Thus, a person who is singled out as *i ch'ujlel* (*i.e.* as a person who has a soul) is an ideal or a model Ch'ol person. In a man, this ideal must correspond to a fraternal, solidary behaviour toward his family and friends; in a woman, it corresponds to a woman who keeps a clean, orderly, well-organized house and who adequately manages the foods from the field and from the backyard pen. The *ch'ujlel* can be lost, *i.e.* one ceases to be *Ch'ol* when one breaks one's relationships of collaboration, solidarity and reciprocity with other members of one's community.

Final considerations

Zapatista children acknowledge their close relationship with, and dependence on nature, which they truly cherish and defend. For them, nature is, on one hand, “mother earth”: it nourishes them, and their life and well-being depend on it. On the other hand, it is linked to what they call their territory that must be defended from aggressions to their community by the government. They are aware of their right to their land and most of them are willing to fight for it when they grow up. The view of these children shows us their respect for the earth and for all beings that live on it; it bears witness to an awareness in the sense that growing food on a cornfield is not

about exploiting the earth but about establishing a reciprocity with it so that just as it nourishes and takes care of them, they must take care of it. From a very early age, the Zapatista children begin to cultivate their knowledge about the various plants and animals that exist in their habitat, and the qualities of each, which will provide them with food or will prove useful in healing rituals. This knowledge is transmitted from one generation to the next, and, generally, through the children's participation in everyday life along with their parents. Another important aspect in their relationship with nature is their huge love and aesthetic appreciation of the jungle that bespeaks an emotional relationship linked to the beauty of the landscape in which they live.

The children of the community of El Bascán share with Zapatista children their appreciation of nature and of the importance of collective work on the cornfield. In both communities, the ethics in relation to animals that can only be killed for food is well established. Another common aspect is that families convey to their children the importance of having a cautious relationship with nature, particularly with those beings that are keepers of the jungle and who, through their supernatural powers, punish those who harm or hurt the land.

The difference that can be observed in the children of the Bascán community is that there are influences that have caused them to move away from the benefits of the jungle. Their families are not generally attached to the territory but seek to motivate their children to leave their territory in search of a job and of new horizons in the neighbouring touristic cities. The penetration of the community by the Protestant churches has imposed huge limitations on the performance of those rituals traditionally carried out in the midst of nature by Indigenous communities, not only by forbidding them but also by threatening and punishing those who dare to perform them. This situation has caused children to spend less time in nature. On the other hand, the assistance provided by the government to these families has brought damage to the earth due to the use of agrochemicals; it has also replaced the traditional agricultural activities on the cornfield with the purchase and fattening of cattle.

As noted earlier, although both of these communities are Ch'ol and both are located in two nearby areas, the social, cultural and political contexts of each have

an enormous influence on the knowledge and the values developed by the children in regard to nature.

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