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Weaving Cooperatives and the Resistance Movement in Highland Chiapas, Mexico

Pass Well Over the Earth

Christine Eber

*In the Eyes of the Ancestors*¹

*Knowing what is yours to do
carries a certain contentment.
To sweep away the trash
from the earthen floor,
wash the corn with limestone
and put it in a pot to cook through the night,
to heft the baby onto your back,
tie her in place with the ends of your shawl.
The ancestors nod when they see you.
But to rest the tumpline on your forehead,
grab the machete leaning against the wall
head up the hill to the last good stand of firewood,
these bring sadness when you do them
remind you of what is missing,
of the one who left now going on two years
to some place whose name you can't pronounce.
You shift the baby to your side
to make room for the wood
stacked high above your head,
then descend the slope
careful not to fall in the slick mud.
You wonder what he is doing now—
perhaps eating fruit that you yearn for
or drinking up his paycheck.
You could use some of that today,
to take the baby to the clinic,
she is coughing so much.
At home you stack the wood by the door,
set the baby down on the floor,
ladle a cup of water
from the almost empty bucket.
The ancestors watch and wait.*

Life has changed dramatically in Chiapas, Mexico, since 1993 when Brenda Rosenbaum and I contributed a chapter to June Nash's edited volume *Crafts in the World Market: The Impact of Global Exchange on Middle American Artisans*. The next year the Zapatista uprising occurred, and its adherents took their vision of a new world to the farthest corners of the state and, eventually, the nation and world. Zapatista support bases (unarmed civilian groups) began to experiment with new social and economic arrangements. At the same time, men were leaving Chiapas in record numbers, migrating in search of work to Mexican cities or farms and to the United States.

The poem that opens this chapter evokes the life of a woman left behind in the wake of the exodus from Chiapas. For decades Tzotzil Maya women of highland Chiapas have been intensifying artisan production in an effort to combat poverty and resist pressures to migrate. In this chapter I focus on a weaving cooperative created by women seeking alternatives to the Mexican government's failed development projects and in the context of their identities as Zapatistas and Catholics.

Tsobol Antzetik (Tzotzil for Women United) is a cooperative of thirty-five women and their children in San Pedro Chenalhó, a Tzotzil-speaking Maya township of highland Chiapas that has been strongly influenced by two social movements, one inspired by the Zapatistas and the other by the Word of God, a progressive Catholic movement rooted in the social justice teachings of the Catholic Church. Women joined these movements in the 1990s, but their organizing efforts began earlier—in the 1980s when they first joined weaving cooperatives. Today in many Chiapas communities, Zapatista support groups, weaving cooperatives, and Word of God groups interrelate and reinforce each other. Participants in these movements strive to create a world in which everyone has their basic needs met and has the right to participate in local, regional, and world markets with dignity. They say that they are “in the resistance.”

Reflecting on the meaning of resistance is key to understanding cooperatives in townships such as Chenalhó where the Zapatista movement is strong (Rus 2002:1025).² Supporters of the movement use the terms “the resistance” and “the holy struggle” to refer to their activities to resist oppression. While the former phrase relates to power inequalities, the latter carries a spiritual connotation derived from Catholic social justice teachings, which relate the contemporary struggle for justice to the struggles of Jesus on behalf of the poor.

In preparing my contribution for this book I have been inspired by June Nash's introduction to *Crafts in the World Market*. One statement in

particular resonates with my understanding of the weavers with whom I work: “The communities of Chiapas relive the past in each task they undertake” (Nash 1993a:20). The weavers of Tsobol Antzetik are very much living in the here and now, but they find meaning through referring to the past; they live each day in the awareness that they are transmitting an ancestral program under their forebears’ watchful eyes.

In her introduction Nash predicted that the survival of traditional crafts in Mesoamerica would require their producers’ entry into international markets and that this entry would depend on developing new relationships between artisans, intermediaries, and consumers. In our chapter in that book, Rosenbaum and I discussed ways in which new relationships were already beginning in the 1980s in cooperatives in highland Chiapas. In the last part of the present chapter I continue the story of the relationships that Maya women have established with non-Maya advisors, including Weaving for Justice, a network of volunteers that I co-founded in Las Cruces, New Mexico. We assist three groups of highland Chiapas weavers to sell their work through fair trade and to educate consumers about human rights issues in Chiapas and in our border region (www.weaving-for-justice.org). Sales of their textiles in the United States have been key to helping these weavers and their families continue to live in their communities and avoid migrating to the United States or Mexican cities in search of work.

Throughout this chapter, I frame the story of how life has changed for the women of Tsobol Antzetik by using the idea of an ancestral program. To illustrate some of my points, I use the words of “*Antonia*,” a co-founder of the cooperative (rendered in italics).³ Antonia’s words, taken from her life story (Eber and “*Antonia*” 2011), show the challenges and successes of weavers in cooperatives as they rework the ancestral program while also advancing their rights as women and providing for their families’ and communities’ survival.

THE ANCESTRAL PROGRAM

What are the ancestral Maya beliefs and practices that the weavers of Tsobol Antzetik are conserving, even as they imbue them with Christian and socialist ideas? Two important ones are (1) reciprocity and (2) respectful social comportment between genders and generations.

Reciprocity in Chenalhó is connected to the belief that humans are in a give-and-take relationship with Mother Earth and other powerful nonhuman beings. Many rituals today reflect that belief, such as thanking Earth for her gifts in daily prayers and in pilgrimages to caves and water holes three times a year (Past et al. 2005). Reciprocity is also connected to the

economic reality that it is unwise to work in solitary labor. Survival depends on giving, loaning, bartering, and borrowing, as well as selling whatever one can produce. Migration and involvement in more individualistic and competitive programs of development and progress have weakened some cultural beliefs, behaviors, and interconnections. Nevertheless, ancestral beliefs shaped by ideas about reciprocity still inform people's daily interactions.

Reciprocity fosters respectful social relations because it depends on maintaining long-term connections. To sustain these, Pedranos (the Maya population of San Pedro Chenalhó) emphasize proper personal comportment. This is supported by the belief that one's essential soul has extensions with wills of their own that no one can completely control (Groark 2008). Hence, all that individuals can control are their own physical and emotional selves and bodies, with which they perform the work of survival. The Tzotzil term for personal and social development is *vulesal ch'ulelal*, which is explained as "making your soul arrive." In this conception, a person's essential soul acquires heat through service to family and community, bringing them ever closer to God and the Maya deities. Maturity comes through learning to act respectfully and reciprocally in service to family and community.

Cargo is the term for a role in unpaid community service. Although the concept developed within the Spanish Catholic colonial system, members of the resistance movement use this term to describe their unpaid work for the movement. Through serving cargos they demonstrate that the group's survival relies on everyone sacrificing to keep it strong. In the Zapatista movement this idea is reflected in the phrase *todo para todos, nada para nosotras* (everything for everyone, nothing for ourselves). In the past and still today, women's traditional cargos are limited to serving as *jnetumetik* (midwives), *j'iloletik* (healers), or partners with their husbands in township governance or in service to the Catholic saints and Maya dieties. Prior to the Word of God and the Zapatista movements, only men held political cargos and attended community meetings. Today women in the resistance movement fill offices in support bases and leadership roles such as president, secretary, and treasurer in cooperatives.

Despite the ideal of respectful and balanced relations between the genders and generations, cultural norms still restrict women's place to the house and hamlet and give men more authority than women have. Complicating the situation, many youth today seek to live more independent lives, which often necessitates leaving their communities. Antonia has

long critiqued the contradiction between ideal and real social relations and has found support for her desire for greater gender equality in the Zapatistas' Women's Revolutionary Law (see Hernández Castillo 1994 for background), the Word of God, and her work in the weaving cooperative. Antonia states her views of gender relations as informed by ancestral teachings: *It's necessary for a man to respect his wife and also for a wife to respect her husband. They must be equal. A man must not mistreat a woman. He must not beat her. Not only men should have the right to leave the house. Women should have this right, too, in order to do good things. We have the same blood, men and women. That's why it's necessary to respect each other* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:35).

BECOMING A *BATZ'I ANTZ* (TRUE WOMAN)

Antonia was born in 1962 when making a living for most indigenous people in highland Chiapas consisted of corn and bean production on family-owned plots combined with working for wages for a few months of the year. Leaving their home communities to pick coffee or cut sugarcane provided the cash needed to supplement the food supplied by their family plots and to purchase medicine, blankets, and other basic commodities (Rus 2012; Rus and Collier 2003). Despite seasonal migration, for as long as people can remember, men's identity in indigenous communities has been tied to semisubsistence farming and women's to weaving and household management. Among middle-aged men and women in Chenalhó these identities are still strong.

In childhood Antonia learned the importance of becoming a *batz'i antz* (true woman) by cooking, weaving, and working in her family's fields and in others' fields in exchange for cash or part of the harvest. At about age five she learned to weave by watching her mother and older sister.

First I made a toy loom. I just put some sticks together and began to weave. I tied together my mother's leftover pieces of yarn and played with the threads. Sometimes it worked, other times it didn't. When my weaving didn't turn out right, I threw it away. When it turned out better I showed it to my mother and she said, "Ah, that's good. Continue with that." That's how I learned little by little, watching how my mom did it. I would say to myself, "Ah, I think that's how it's done!"

*Then, when I was about six or seven, I began to make something small like a napkin. But it didn't turn out well. When I was doing a little better—I think I was twelve years old—my mother told me that I should make a blouse.... It took me months to make the blouse because I was in school.... The design on my blouse was an ancient one that my mother taught me. It's called *batz'i luch* [the true design]. We still have it today (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:11–12).⁴*

RESPONDING TO THE DEBT CRISIS

Antonia wanted to go on in school after sixth grade, but her father wanted her to join the Word of God and stay at home like her mother. Antonia tried to run away once, but eventually resigned herself to being a wife, mother, and weaver. When she was eighteen she married Domingo, a lay preacher in the Word of God. The couple had six children and became leaders in their community in the Word of God, the cooperatives, and the Zapatista movement. Antonia reflects on her reasons for marrying: *When I was fifteen or sixteen I thought about marrying. "Ah, to be happy, to have a companion." I didn't want to live alone. I thought that one day when my parents die, if I don't marry, no one will be there to support me. But now I know that's not true, since I've seen that I can earn money* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:31).

Women's cash earnings from selling whatever they raise or produce gained importance in the household economy in the 1970s when several forces converged to make the system of wage labor combined with subsistence farming more difficult to maintain (D. Rus 1990; J. Rus 2012). Population increases meant that heirs received smaller plots of land. More consumer goods made their way into indigenous communities, competing for the small amounts of cash income. And indigenous elites joined forces with the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional, Institutional Revolutionary Party) to maintain order and provide votes, in exchange for the power to distribute governmental largess in the form of access to land, jobs, credit, monetary grants, or loans (Rus and Collier 2003).

In the late 1970s, Mexico experienced a repositioning in the global economic system and had to devalue its peso. This crisis made it difficult for the Mexican government to pay back its foreign debt. In order to make payments on the debt and receive funds for industrializing the economy, the government cut back its spending on public works projects, subsidies for food, and credit for farmers producing traditional crops. Jobs in public works ended and plantation work became scarcer.

I came to live with Antonia in 1987 during a debt crisis. That year Antonia and Domingo planted coffee in hopes that it would provide a more stable income than they had secured selling weavings, pigs, eggs, and bananas. When their coffee plants were still young, the couple hoped to sell their coffee at a good price, but the timing of their venture couldn't have been worse. In the era of neoliberalism all farmers became vulnerable to drastic fluctuations in prices. In 1988 Antonia and Domingo watched fearfully as the price of coffee fell from 2,500 pesos a kilo in January to 2,000 in September, a harbinger of the 50 percent fall in the world coffee price in 1989. Still, the couple hoped that they could ride the waves as prices rose

and fell. In 2002 the world coffee price fell to the lowest price it had been in 116 years, 18.59 per kilo (41 cents a pound). In 2013 Antonia and Domingo received only 22 pesos a kilo, just over half of the 43 pesos they received the previous year.

During the 1980s selling weavings and coffee were the two main ways that families complemented their semisubsistence farming in Chenalhó. Beginning in the 1990s running general stores in their homes became another popular strategy for people to earn cash. Some women sought access to markets for their weavings by joining “cooperatives.” The first weaving co-ops in Chiapas had begun in the 1950s and were administered by state and federal agencies, such as the National Indigenous Institute (Vargas-Cetina 1999). During the 1970s, nongovernmental organizations began to work with indigenous women to create alternatives to state-run cooperatives. In 1985, Antonia’s mother joined Sna Jolobil (House of the Weavers), one of the oldest nongovernmental cooperatives in highland Chiapas with members from several Mayan language groups and *municipios* (townships, comparable to US counties). In the Sna Jolobil store, Antonia and her relatives found a place in the city where they could speak Tzotzil and feel respected. Initially the women perceived the organization to be like a cooperative, but in reality Sna Jolobil’s model was more like a business. With her facility in Spanish, Antonia became the leader of her local group.

At first I was very happy to earn money from my weavings and I knew that it was safe selling at the store in San Cristóbal.... I did a lot of work for my group and I bore a lot of suffering. I had to go every two weeks to the store in San Cristóbal because the women depended on me to collect their pay. I had to wait many hours inside the office, always carrying my child. It was a very small office and I felt as if I was in jail, all closed up. After many hours of waiting the store managers would say, “Ah, there’s no money yet,” or “I don’t know if it has sold yet. Return another day.” That’s what they said, no more. I had to ask a percentage of each weaving from the women to pay my transportation and other expenses and I had to go back without money, spending the women’s money for nothing (Eber and “Antonia” 2011:125).

In 1989 Antonia, her mother, and two of her sisters left Sna Jolobil to form their own cooperative, Tsobol Antzetik. They hoped to reduce the amount of time waiting to be paid and to gain greater control over the pricing of their weavings. At that time I was looking for a way to give something back to women in Antonia’s community. The women gave me the cargo of helping them sell their weavings in the United States.

Antonia was the representative of Tsobol Antzetik for ten years, after which her sister Marcela took over her cargo. Marcela served the co-op until she finally resigned in 2008. The work had become too much for her while

raising ten children. With her resignation, the co-op members decided that the job of representative was too much for one woman. In 2009 they elected two women, one older and one younger, to share the cargo.

HITTING THE WALL

The passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1993 opened Mexican markets to corn from the United States, which is subsidized and grown on a scale beyond anything possible in Mexico. Cheap US corn broke the backs of small farmers in Mexico, pushing them off their lands, into cities, and across the US-Mexico border to look for work. Many indigenous people joined protests against the government's policies during the 1980s and early 1990s, only to be met with repression.

On my visits to Chenalhó in the early 1990s a deepening sense of desperation was palpable. On January 1, 1994, the same day that NAFTA went into effect, the Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional (Zapatista Army of National Liberation, EZLN) seized four towns. The cry that went out from Chiapas on January 1 was “¡Basta! (Enough is enough!)” With these words the EZLN called for land, housing, jobs, food, health care, democracy, justice, and an end to hundreds of years of exploitation. Eventually the Zapatistas found their way into receptive communities in Chenalhó. Groups called support bases began to form. Support bases in Chenalhó found common cause with another social justice organization, Sociedad Civil las Abejas (the Bees Civil Society), a Catholic social justice organization that had formed in 1992. Many of the catechists who helped spread the Word of God movement in the 1980s, including Domingo, became involved in the Zapatista movement.

Las Abejas and Zapatista support groups are the driving force of the resistance movement in Chenalhó. Las Abejas chapel groups are located in about twenty-five of Chenalhó's ninety-nine communities while Zapatista support bases—groups from twenty-five to a couple of hundred men, women, and teenagers—are located in about thirty-eight. The resistance movement is a strong presence in the township, but its numbers are only perhaps a quarter to a third of the population of around 32,000.⁵

Two key markers of the Bees and the Zapatistas are a commitment to work collectively and not to take government handouts, such as food, cement for floors, or tin for roofs. Members of the resistance movement see handouts as a way that the government has bought their submission so that it can continue using their land and labor without regard for their dignity and human rights. Women in the resistance movement do not participate in Oportunidades (Opportunities), the Mexican government's antipov-

erty program. Mothers who register with this program obtain a monthly cash stipend for each child in school in return for their compliance with mandatory health checkups (Olivera 2005:613). Women in the resistance movement maintain that this program is another government method to control them. Rather than depend on government support, Zapatistas rely on their own resources and assistance from sympathetic nongovernmental groups within and outside Mexico. In 1995 Zapatistas in Chenalhó decided to form an autonomous township—San Pedro Polhó—with a set of social and political institutions parallel to the formal township institutions with their headquarters in Chenalhó. The creation of the autonomous township was their first major effort to live free of government domination (Eber 2003).

Members of Tsobol Antzetik are affiliated either with Zapatista bases or the Bees. Those in Zapatista bases see their Zapatista and Catholic identities as closely related. Women in both organizations refer to their work in the resistance movement as “the holy struggle.” In 1994, soon after she joined a Zapatista base, Antonia described her view of how the Word of God and the Zapatista movement relate to one another. *When I joined the Word of God it was my way to learn about injustices. It was like my flashlight, the light on the path, so I could see where to walk.... But on our path we came to a big log, the government and powerful people, that blocked our way. We couldn't go any further until the Zapatistas came and cut the log. After that we began to act on the teachings that we had learned in the Word of God. That's why we call what we are doing ja lekil pas k'op [the holy struggle] because our struggle comes from God* (Eber and “Antonia” 2011:74).

Uniting poor people to struggle for justice is a major motivation behind both the Zapatistas and the Bees, but differences between the two organizations have led to divisions in families and communities. For example, the Bees do not condone using weapons for any reason, while Zapatista support bases maintain that the use of arms during the uprising was necessary. After the uprising, the Mexican government worked through the army and paramilitary groups to divide the Zapatistas and the Abejas so they could not mount a unified resistance. On December 22, 1997, a paramilitary group massacred forty-five women, children, and men in the Bees who were praying in a chapel in Acteal, Chenalhó (see Arriaga Alarcón et al. 1998). After the massacre the Zapatistas and the Abejas worked hard to resolve their differences and committed to putting up a unified front.

While internal tensions in the resistance movement persist, the greatest tension is between those in the resistance movement and those who are not. Over the years, some members of Tsobol Antzetik felt compelled

to take government handouts, requiring their resignation from the cooperative. Rejecting government handouts takes courage and staying power. In February 2013 while I was visiting with Paulina (Antonia's daughter, a mother of two small boys, and a member of Tsobol Antzetik), she related a recent discussion with her husband, who was feeling desperate and broached the subject of taking government aid. She told him in no uncertain terms, "I'll never take handouts. I was raised in a Zapatista home, and we'll never take the government's crumbs."

During the years of the military and paramilitary violence in Chenalhó, Antonia felt called to go to Polhó to assist the refugees flooding into the community. In 1997 she helped several hundred women organize themselves into a cooperative so that they could sell their weavings to human rights workers posted in Polhó, to foreigners who visited there on delegations, and in a store of Zapatista weavers in San Cristóbal called *Mujeres por la Dignidad* (Women for Dignity). At the same time, she started a small weaving and embroidery cooperative in her community with women in her local Zapatista support base. In this group members pooled their earnings and used the money for joint projects. Antonia describes the process of founding this co-op: *It was like planting a tree. First we planted a seedling and tended it until it grew. We watered it and waited. Our tree grew a little bit each year. We didn't expect it to bear fruit for many years. Eventually we began to eat a little bit of the fruit from our tree, but only after many years of working hard to help it grow* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:123).

Antonia's call for patience and perseverance in the face of the government's efforts to dismantle the resistance movement in Chiapas illustrates an attitude in Zapatista communities that makes their autonomous health, educational, economic, and political projects possible. Since 1994, members of the resistance movement throughout Chiapas have created a variety of cooperatives focused on selling products such as weavings, coffee, bread, honey, embroidery, pottery, vegetables, and fruits. As one co-op dies, another seems to rise from its ashes (Earle and Simonelli 2005).⁶

NEW AND OLD OBSTACLES AND WEAVERS' RESPONSES

Most of the obstacles to working in weaving cooperatives in the 1980s and '90s that Brenda Rosenbaum and I enumerated in our chapter of *Crafts in the World Market* persist, and some new ones have arisen. This reality is not due to any lack of effort by weavers and their advisors and supporters to overcome obstacles. In fact the many obstacles to cooperative work, some of which are described below, reveal just how creative and resourceful the members of cooperatives must be in order to create alternative economic

relations (see Eber and Rosenbaum 1993; Eber and Tanski 2001, 2002; Vargas-Cetina 2005).

Envy

Envy in Tzotzil Maya communities is connected to an assumption that others' true beliefs and motivations are not easily accessed, which stems from a conception of the self as composed of extensions, as mentioned above. Envious people may bring illness or death by going to a cave with candles and rum and asking the Earth Lord to make the person they envy fall sick or die or fail in whatever venture they may be involved in.

Relatives and friends sometimes envy the weavers involved in the resistance movement and try to thwart them in their family life or organizational work. Antonia has confronted envy stemming from her involvement with foreigners: *When a woman travels to another town there's a lot of criticism, lots of ridiculing. That's why women don't want to go. They don't want anyone to make fun of them or envy them. I always bear up under the criticism, the ridicule from my compañeras, my relatives, my countrymen and women. But it hurts me each time someone says something. Since the beginning there has been a lot of ridicule of me. But it has calmed down. They got used to how I am* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:150).

Members of the resistance movement in Chenalhó sometimes ask elders to pray to counteract envy. These special prayers—only in Tzotzil—involve petitions to both Maya and Christian spiritual guides (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:209).

With increased migration and access to education, social and economic inequalities, as well as more acceptance of diverse lifeways, have become a part of life in Chenalhó. Today Pedranos no longer hide their TVs and DVD players by putting woven cloths over them. Cement block houses with trucks parked beside them—an unheard-of display of difference a couple of decades ago—don't raise eyebrows now. In 2010 Antonia acquired a telephone.

Cash Flow

Reducing the amount of time that weavers wait to be paid was uppermost in my mind when Rosenbaum and I wrote our chapter for Nash's 1993 volume. Despite over four decades of weavers interacting with markets outside their region and nation, this obstacle persists. The main sales venues for Weaving for Justice are four fair trade stores, events sponsored by churches and other organizations, and monthly sales at a farmers market. Most of our sales take place toward the end of the year as people make purchases as part of celebrations of Day of the Dead and Christmas. Since

2013 we have participated in alternative Black Friday sales on the day after Thanksgiving. We have created a store on our website in hopes of providing steady sales throughout the year (see www.weaving-for-justice.org). Mayan Hands, the weaving organization that Brenda helped establish in Guatemala, has found that internet sales have greatly reduced the problem of cash flow (see www.mayanhands.org).

Limitations of the Cargo Model of Representation

Cooperatives that use a cargo model of leadership, grounded in ancestral values, accept that their numbers must remain within a certain limit that leaders can handle, given that leaders are not paid for their work. The women of Tsobol Antzetik add new members slowly so as not to tax the leaders too much. Co-op membership has remained fairly steady due to some members leaving in favor of taking government handouts.

Antonia recalled her sister Marcela's work before she had to resign due to the burden of having to care for ten children in addition to her cargo: *My sister does it all. First, she makes a list of each woman, how much work she brought, and then she makes the account of the money due each woman. Then she adds up the total due. Out of that she has to take out the cost of shipping. At times we pay the shipping ourselves. At times, she charges us for her transportation to San Cristóbal to mail the weavings. Then she has to make an account of how much the weavers will receive. She says that she needs to work her brain, no? It takes time to think and everything else. That's why she doesn't want to be representative any more. Also, other women want to join the group and my sister doesn't want more women to enter because that will mean more work* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:126).

Women's Increased Workload

One of the major drawbacks for Antonia of her cooperative work is the added number of hours of work per day and the stress of not being able to fulfill her duties as well as she would like. When she was younger she enjoyed going to meetings, but as childcare and household responsibilities increased, the stress mounted. At one point Antonia was nominated to be a local representative of her Zapatista support base, but she had to decline the nomination because of her heavy workload of raising six children and having cargos in two cooperatives. Despite his past support of her role as a weaving organizer, Domingo didn't offer to take over some of Antonia's work so that she could take the leadership position in the Zapatista base. Eventually base members decided that only single women should serve in leadership roles because it is too difficult for married women to fulfill their responsibilities to both their households and the base.



FIGURE 4.1

Antonia takes a rare afternoon nap with her baby, 1987. Drawing by Christine Eber.

In the 1990s Antonia described the challenges of combining activism and motherhood: *It's very difficult to participate in the community because women have a lot of children. When a woman has a cargo, there's no one to take care of the children. That's the main problem that we have. It's not the same as here where you have childcare centers, where you can leave the children in someone else's care. In contrast, we always have a child stuck to our back or our breast. That's how children grow. When they're a little bigger, five or six years old, they still need someone in the house to give them their meals. Also, men don't earn much. They also need women to make money in order to maintain the house. But, if the woman goes out of the house and also the man, no one cares for the children. It's difficult. Nobody can stay to care for the house because of lack of money. We lack a lot. If we had money I think that it would be easier for the women who want to participate or have cargos. But even if they have money they may not want to accept a cargo* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:119).

Male Dominance

Male dominance is the most obdurate obstacle to women's cooperative work. In *Crafts in the World Market*, Rosenbaum and I explored the theme of marital tension through the story of an argument between Antonia and

her husband, Domingo, over Antonia's expanding public role as a leader of weaving cooperatives in her township and Domingo's resistance to that. Domingo eventually learned to accept Antonia's leadership roles, but other women's husbands have beaten them for taking more public roles in their communities. In her introduction to *Crafts in the World Market*, Nash (1993a:11–12) pointed to the violence women experienced in Chiapas as a result of moving out of their traditional roles. Violence toward women in Chiapas and in Mexico more widely has increased since the early 1990s. Femicides and violence toward women are embedded in the structural violence of poverty, male dominance, and racism, all of which are exacerbated by neoliberal economic policies, failed migration policies, and the low-intensity war. Chiapas is one of the Mexican states, along with Chihuahua, that has a high rate of femicides (Olivera 2008:23, 41).

In indigenous townships, young men have few options for work and for social standing in their communities. Many compensate by adopting a hyper-macho form of behavior that they learn from interacting with mestizo men. In the process they repudiate the humble demeanor prescribed for both genders by the ancestors. Wives and domestic partners are the most frequent target of men's anger.

Most women in Tsobol Antzetik rarely travel outside of their township, and many of the older members have not gone to school and do not speak Spanish, or only with great embarrassment. Most of the daughters of the members of Tsobol Antzetik ended school at sixth grade. A few choose to remain single and live with their parents, which is made possible by their weaving earnings. Two of these young women are leaders in the Bees and CODIMUJ (Diocese Coordination of Women), a women's organization in the Catholic diocese.

Antonia's two daughters made the effort to attend school past sixth grade, but after a few years they found it too difficult to negotiate their parents' expectations of them not to socialize with boys and their desire to have boyfriends like non-Maya girls do.⁷ Both girls dropped out at age fifteen to marry. Antonia's eldest daughter, Paulina, is in a stable marriage, which is uncommon among young people today. Antonia's youngest daughter, Rosalva, left school to be with a young man who already had a wife and a child, whom he said he would leave. But then he started to abuse Rosalva, and she returned, pregnant, to live with her parents. Rosalva faces a future of trying to support her young son by weaving and depending on her parents' help. Fortunately, both Paulina and Rosalva are dedicated to weaving and have the support and guidance of Antonia and other women in the

cooperative to advance their skills and also the knowledge that if they have problems they can turn to kin and co-op members for help (Plate 5).

Paulina, Rosalva, and other young women members of Tsobol Antzetik bring a more assertive style to cooperative work as a result in part of the influence from their longer formal education and the influence of the Zapatista movement.⁸ Antonia wishes that more women in Tsobol Antzetik would speak up in community meetings, although women are quite vocal in all-women meetings of the cooperative. These meetings are lively but as in mixed gatherings, members take care not to interrupt, raise their voices, compete with each other, or dominate each other. Antonia appreciates her people's traditional norms, which encourage both women and men to act humbly and seek consensus, behaviors that keep discord at a minimum.

Women's shyness and lack of time and freedom to travel back and forth to San Cristóbal, where banks and the post office are located, means that men continue to play helping roles in Tsobol Antzetik. Vestiges of patri-lineages still structure life in Chenalhó, with two lineages predominating among members of Tsobol Antzetik. The women of the cooperative use their lineage relations to build their organization and to take advantage of the greater mobility that men enjoy. For example, Antonia's brother, one of the lineage leaders, lives in San Cristóbal and owns a vehicle. He helps pack and ship boxes of weavings to the United States.

Migration

Most young men with land raise coffee in addition to corn and beans, but earnings from coffee and weaving sales have not eliminated the need to travel to obtain cash through wage labor. In 2006 Chiapas reached first place among Mexican states in the numbers of people leaving to find work in the United States. Single men are the majority of the migrants, but increasingly single women are accompanying them or leaving on their own.

Antonia's youngest son, Alberto, was not interested in participating in the Zapatista movement or in cooperatives. He tried going to high school, which is still not common for most youth due to the costs. But in 2008 Alberto dropped out and found his way with the help of a guide across the US-Mexico border to Phoenix, Arizona, where he got a ride to Florida. For three and a half years he worked in tobacco fields, fruit orchards, and Chinese restaurants in several US states. Although Antonia understood why her son migrated, she wishes that he and other youth were willing to stay at home and participate in the resistance movement: *They don't want to nourish themselves the way we do. They don't want to wear just any shoes; now*

they want to wear shoes that cost a lot and expensive clothes. They want to have a car, a two story house, everything. That's why many are leaving for the other side. Meanwhile the family that stays suffers a lot. And those who go, they suffer crossing the border. And when they are over there they suffer, too (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:179–180).

Despite not approving of her son leaving for the United States, Antonia benefited from the cash he sent home. With Alberto's earnings she and Domingo tore down their old house, which had wood walls and a dirt floor, and built in its place a cement-block house with a tile floor. Alberto returned to Chiapas in the fall of 2012 but was unable to find work there, and now he works in a hotel in Playa del Carmen, Quintana Roo, Mexico. He talks about returning to the United States despite increased border enforcement.

Top-Down Economic Development Projects

The low-intensity, or silent, war that began after the Zapatista uprising continues. Today it is evident in a mega-development project called Project Mesoamerica, a reduced form of Plan Puebla Panama, which the Mexican government was forced to put on the back burner in 2003 after widespread resistance from campesino and human rights groups. The first phase of the project—the rural cities project—focused on housing and was carried out in Chiapas (Way 2010).

The premise of the rural cities project is that regrouping rural people into cities will bring them much-needed jobs and services that are too costly to provide to dispersed communities. But the Chiapas state government's program appears similar to other counterinsurgency strategies that confine sectors of the population supportive of the insurgency into regroupment centers. By moving people into centers, their allegiance to the Zapatistas can be broken down and redirected to the state. Meanwhile the Zapatistas become isolated to be more easily eliminated.

Las Abejas and Zapatistas in Chenalhó view this project as part of the war that the government has been waging against them. They see resettlement as forcing them to reinvent themselves and their communities, imperiling the ancestral program. Whole communities have strongly resisted the rural cities project. In 2012 the Zapatistas and Las Abejas were successful in keeping a rural city from being built in Chenalhó. Santiago el Pinar, a nearby rural city, is now in ruins because the people who settled there realized that no work had materialized and that their lives were becoming worse. They abandoned the houses, which have since been vandalized.

PROGRESS GAINED FROM WORKING IN COOPERATIVES

Since colonization, the original people of Chiapas have been relegated to subordinate positions and on a daily basis have had to act small for fear of offending those in power. In recent decades, those who formed autonomous communities and who hold to collective conceptions of development have acquired the courage and capacity to act in a larger way in the hopes of transforming social, economic, and political relations in their state, their nation, and the world. All the while, they seek to remain in humble and respectful relation to one another and to the ancestors and sacred beings, lest they fan the flames of envy. As discussed above, women bear additional burdens in this balancing act, but despite the obstacles women in cooperatives have made gains in many areas of their lives.

Increased Household Income

Through banding together, women have been able to access markets outside of their communities. Women do weave blouses to barter or sell to other women in their own communities, but there is no local market for the many other weavings they make. Renting a storefront in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the urban center of highland Chiapas, or in the head town of their township, where visitors sometimes come, is not possible because of the expense and women not having time to staff the store. Most cooperatives in highland Chiapas find themselves in the position of depending on sales abroad and grassroots support organizations to help them reach foreign markets.

Although proceeds from sales have not been as steady or as large as the weavers or Weaving for Justice would like, the cash that the weavers have earned over the past two decades has contributed substantially to their ability to stay on their lands and continue weaving (Plate 6). It has also helped them improve their standard of living. In 2014 when a member of Weaving for Justice visited with Tsobol Antzetik, Marcela's husband (Antonia's brother-in-law) announced proudly to everyone present that due to his wife's and daughters' labors in weaving, the family was able to construct the only cement block house in their community not built by someone who had worked in the United States.

Preservation and Revitalization of Ancestral Weaving Techniques and Designs

Cooperatives have also helped resist the loss or deterioration of ancestral techniques and designs, as June Nash predicted. Sna Jolobil is a leader

in this regard (Vargas-Cetina 2005). Antonia remembers the fine work that she did when she was a member of that co-op and doubts that she could do such fine work today. Nevertheless, the leaders of Tsobol Antzetik make quality a priority, while balancing this priority with their desire to enable girls and less experienced women to benefit from belonging to a cooperative.

In the early 1990s, Tsobol Antzetik members recovered an important design that had fallen out of circulation. After many years of hearing me ask why they didn't have a woman design in their corpus of weaving symbols, a member of the co-op asked her elderly aunt about this. Her aunt thought that she had seen such a design on a ceremonial cloth called *b'ut korision* (sacrificial victim), which she kept in her home to loan to leaders of saints' fiestas. The niece borrowed the cloth and brought it to the next co-op meeting where the weavers were delighted to see a row of woman symbols among rows of saints, men, toads, and the batz'i luch, an ancient Maya cosmogram. When I received the ceremonial cloth in a box of weavings I immediately recognized the woman symbol because of her three fingers and toes and three lines descending from her vagina. Three is the ancient Maya number for women, representing the three stones that hold up the *comal*, the clay griddle on which women make tortillas. For a long time the weavers had woven a man symbol with four fingers and toes symbolizing the four corners of the *milpa*, the corn and bean field. Now they had its counterpart.

Centro de Textiles del Mundo Maya (Textile Center of the Maya World), a relatively new textile museum in San Cristóbal de las Casas, is likely to encourage the rediscovery of lost symbols and techniques. The museum welcomes weavers from the region to use its collection to expand their awareness of the history of weaving in Mesoamerica and to inspire them in their work (www.fomentoculturalbanamex.org/ctmm).

Increased Self-Awareness and Political and Cultural Consciousness

Cash earnings from selling weavings through organizations that women form has raised respect in Chenalhó for women's work in their communities and outside. Women have gained increased pride, self-awareness, and political consciousness through their involvement in cooperatives and the resistance movement. Evidence of these gains is that women have not given up their traditional clothing, as some predicted. Women could clothe themselves more cheaply in nontraditional clothing, but they make the economic sacrifice to continue wearing traditional blouses, skirts, and shawls because these symbolize their township identities, which are important to

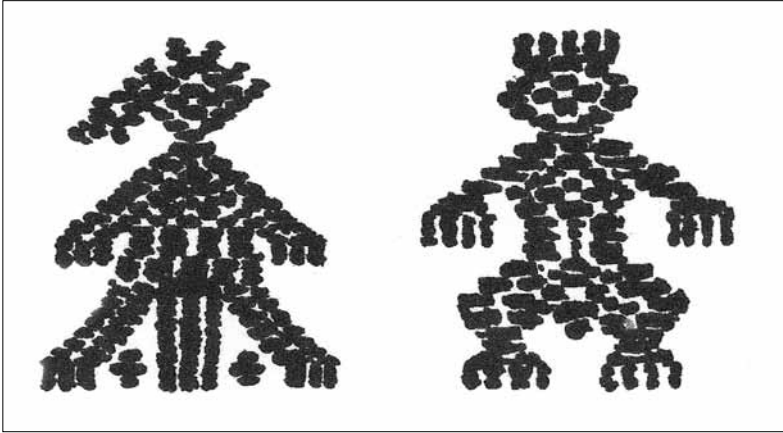


FIGURE 4.2

Female and male symbols as represented in Chenalhó textiles. Drawings by Christine Eber.

them. Women even share designs between townships and wear each other's blouses for pleasure and to show solidarity with other Maya women. Women also defend their right to speak Tzotzil, their mother tongue. As Antonia states, *If my granddaughters didn't speak Tzotzil, I couldn't advise them. I couldn't give them my words, they couldn't learn my wisdom* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:195).

Today women in the resistance movement stress the importance of continuing the ancestral program through backstrap weaving and other valued traditions. They distinguish these customs from ones they would like their people to abandon, such as drinking alcohol. "Good traditions" that women within and outside of the resistance movement want to continue include using plants and prayers to heal; fasting and praying to keep individual souls and the community in balance; welcoming back the souls of the ancestors on the Day of the Dead; cooking ceremonial foods and conducting rituals for saints' fiestas; and visiting sacred places to offer prayers three times a year. Antonia states, *I don't think that we're going to forget all the good traditions. But if it weren't for the holy struggle, we might forget everything about our traditions* (Eber and "Antonia" 2011:195).

Expanded Roles for Women in Their Communities and Beyond

Studies of women's participation in cooperatives in Mexico suggest that working in groups rather than working alone may lead to more lasting changes in gender roles and relations in their communities (Cruz-Torres 2012). Increasing acceptance in Maya communities for women remaining

single has led to more young women taking on leadership positions in their communities and beyond. Several single women in Tsobol Antzetik are becoming excellent weavers with the time they have to focus on weaving instead of on taking care of husbands and children. A few have been chosen to serve cargos in the Word of God and Zapatista movements. The numbers of single women and mothers is increasing in Chenalhó and throughout Chiapas (Rodriguez 2002). As Rosalinda Santiz Diaz and Kate O'Donnell discuss (this volume), a growing number of single women in Jolom Mayaetik, including Rosalinda, are developing leadership skills, studying in high school, and going on to the university (see also Castro Apreza 2003; O'Donnell 2010). Opportunities for married women to develop themselves outside of their households and communities remain limited.⁹

LESSONS LEARNED ABOUT COLLABORATING ACROSS BORDERS

When June Nash asked me to contribute a chapter to her 1993 book I was honored. In the ensuing decades my gratitude to June has deepened for encouraging me to follow the threads of change in Mesoamerican artisans' lives and those of other artisans in the Americas and the world. I am also grateful to the weavers in several cooperatives in Chiapas for showing me how new conceptions of relationships and development can link people in chains of social and economic exchange that respect cultural, ethnic, national, and individual differences while working to reduce economic inequality. During the years of assisting weavers in Tsobol Antzetik and other highland Chiapas cooperatives, I have learned many lessons.

How to Grow

Weaving for Justice has joined forces with several women's organizations in our border region, specifically in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua (<http://www.ragstobritches.org>) and in Chaparral, a colonia located between Las Cruces, New Mexico, and El Paso, Texas (Eber, Snedden, and Dallin 2006; Eber et al. 2006). With the assistance of our volunteer network we sell the women's artisan work on the US side of the border and also hold educational events that relate the experiences of weavers in Chiapas to artisan groups on the US-Mexico border. Everyone involved in these efforts shares a commitment to keeping friendships and kinship relations at the center of our work. This commitment dictates that our work continue at a grassroots level and not grow beyond a scale that the artisans can produce for and that both they and we believe cohere with our values.

How to Balance Tradition and Innovation

Women have gained courage and inspiration from participating in the resistance movement, which they have translated into their artisan work. Weavers in the resistance movement create consumer tastes, on their own cultural terms, through experimenting with new ideas, as Duncan Earle illustrates in his chapter in this volume on Zapatista artisanry.

The weavers of Tsobol Antzetik produce several products that communicate to consumers the value of a product within its cultural context, while also showing its practical value in a different cultural context. Three of these products are (1) a placemat and napkin set based on the traditional striped tortilla cloth used in Chenalhó and featuring ancestral designs on the napkins; (2) a traditional wedding gift, composed of a tortilla cloth, a gourd, and a net bag to carry produce from the fields; and (3) gift bags embroidered with plants and animals and their Tzotzil and Spanish names, or with Spanish and Tzotzil messages about the struggle for justice.

The wedding set is the only gift a couple receives in Chenalhó, given to the bride by her mother-in-law and symbolizing the couple's union. Men macrame the string bags from cotton or agave fiber, women weave the tortilla cloth, and whole families collect the gourds. Weavers have made a conscious decision to produce the placemat and napkin set for consumers, whom they have learned use placemats when eating, and they make the gift bags because they have learned that consumers give gifts on a variety of occasions. Although such amenities are a luxury that the weavers cannot afford, rather than envy the consumers, they focus on how they can benefit from economic inequalities while working to reduce them. In these three products weavers convey both the singularity of their cultural creations and their ability to transform aspects of their culture into marketable products wherein valued relationships between people, plants, animals, and the ancestors inhere. In commercializing these products, weavers are effecting both reciprocal relationships and commoditized exchanges, which are often seen as polar opposites (Nash 1993a:12).

Fostering Respect for Weavers and Their Art Throughout the Commodity Chain

The weavers and members of Weaving for Justice have made respect for one another's autonomy and rights a foundation of our collaboration. Even as mothers, the women of Tsobol Antzetik give their children a good deal of autonomy, in keeping with cultural ideas about maturation, which are founded on notions of souls having independent natures and paths.

CHRISTINE EBER

Following their model of personal and social development has helped the non-Maya members of Weaving for Justice avoid the maternalism that often characterizes the efforts of outsiders who work with poor and marginalized women.

Despite our efforts to respect the women's autonomy and values, the economic inequality between the weavers and Weaving for Justice members is a constant challenge. Recognizing that we cannot change entrenched economic inequalities in the short term is a sobering reality. We are grateful to the weavers for framing our relationships in terms of being *compañeras* (friends in struggle). This relatively new relationship, not based on kinship, puts us on a more even footing with the weavers, and we can talk more honestly about the different challenges we face in our societies.

Learning how to be *compañeras* has encouraged Weaving for Justice members to try to reduce the alienation that occurs in the process of commodifying weavings. From the beginning we have been concerned that selling the weavings in the United States dislodges them from their cultural contexts and distances buyers from weavers, a process that teaches consumers little of the origins or the ancestral beliefs, practices, and aesthetics encoded in the weavings. To address this problem, we connect buyers to the weavers and their art by providing literature that places the weavings in historical, cultural, social, political, economic, and individual contexts. For example, we tag each weaving with a photo of the weaver and their biography in their own words. The goal of our literature is to put consumers in a more meaningful and respectful relationship with the weavers through making available resources to continue learning about Maya weaving as well as how the fates of both weavers and consumers are interwoven in the global economy.

NEW FLOWERING S

I opened this chapter by stating that my goal was to use the story of one weaving cooperative to illustrate how an ancestral program has guided Maya women in their artisan production in highland Chiapas, Mexico. In conclusion, I want to emphasize that in the hands of the weavers of Tsobol Antzetik the ancestral program has become a mobile and adaptable creation enabling them to persevere in the face of a range of forces allied against their interests. These weavers proudly carry the ancestral program with them as they make their way through a moving river of diverse influences and changing circumstances. All the while, the ancestors watch, wait, and wonder at this new flowering of hope and creativity.

CREATING AND SUSTAINING A SOLIDARITY NETWORK

These suggestions are a distillation of my own reflections and those of members of Weaving for Justice, an all-volunteer group in Las Cruces, New Mexico, that assists three Maya women's weaving groups in Chiapas, Mexico. We hope that they are helpful to readers who would like to create and sustain a solidarity network with artisans in another culture or nation.

- Listen, listen, listen. Keep uppermost in your mind the privilege that you have to be able to learn from and accompany people who have different conceptions of many aspects of life, including economics, art, development, and community. Spend time in their community, staying in the homes of artisans if possible. Help the artisans and their families with daily tasks. Learn what matters to them, what they are worried about, what they dream about, what they hope to accomplish. Look for their strengths, which may be different from yours. Acknowledge and share your strengths with them, too, and be honest about your limitations. Try to visit the artisans as often as possible so that communication can be open and ongoing and problems can be resolved face-to-face. Cultural exchanges with the artisans in which they visit your community and you visit theirs will help your group sustain its commitment and enthusiasm.
- Make an effort to learn at least some words in the artisans' language(s) and ask them to teach you about their customs. Ask someone if they have time to teach you how to make the artisan work that you will sell for them. Even learning how to do a small task in the overall process will show them that you want to learn what is involved in producing their artisan work so that you can better educate consumers.
- Learn how decisions are made in the artisans' community and do not interfere in that process unless your input is requested. Ask the artisans what they need from you, including what they might want to know about your culture and ways of working. Most artisan groups want information and need guidance but it's important not to tell them what to do. If you can, expunge the phrase "You should..." from your lexicon.
- Be clear about the level or scale of production that the artisans want to work on and that your group can handle. Don't make promises you may not be able to keep. Try to respect the scale

you decide on, even when seductive offers come along that would increase sales but might put the artisans in a difficult position. For example, weavers we work with in Chiapas must balance their weaving for sale with all their other work and cannot meet demands to produce fast or on a large scale.

- In general be skeptical of offers to help your organization grow from people who may not share your business model and do not understand the artisans' lives and cultures. In this same vein, be skeptical of technology as the answer to all problems.
- Meeting at least once a month will help your group stay mindful of your goals and values and make good decisions. It will also ensure that everyone has ownership of the group process and the opportunity to express their talents and volunteer in a way that gratifies them.
- One way to help your organization grow is to offer memberships, which might come with a small gift, a discount on purchases of artisan products, email updates, or an annual newsletter about your work.
- Context, context, context. We are convinced that context is to selling culturally significant products what location is to selling real estate. Our most successful sales are those that accompany an event or program in which we speak about the weavings. If the venues where you sell do not provide relevant context, you can create the necessary social and cultural context by giving a presentation about the artisans, mounting a small exhibit, or showing a film of them at work in their homes and communities. Even informative posters go a long way to providing historical and cultural context. These can be supplemented by handouts and other literature. Most people greatly appreciate knowing something about the lives of the artisans and the meaning of their work.
- Connect your work to larger social issues. In the case of Maya weaving sales, we show the connection between selling textiles and migration. We inform consumers that sales of textiles help artisans stay on their land, where they can continue to raise some of their food, instead of having to migrate to distant states in Mexico or to the United States.
- Try to keep a sense of humor, especially in the tough times. Laugh at yourself when you make mistakes and laugh together at our zany, unpredictable world.

Notes

1. I wrote this poem and took the title from the words that leaders of saints' fiestas in Amatenango del Valle say at the beginning of prayers on entering office. See Nash 1970.

2. Jan Rus (2002:1026) reframes resistance in highland Chiapas as "a long term strategic commitment" to defend all that the ancestors have handed down since the beginning of time, including land, language, beliefs, and knowledge.

3. Antonia's words are taken from Eber and "Antonia" 2011. Antonia is a pseudonym, as are other names in this chapter. Brenda Rosenbaum and I also used Antonia's experiences in our 1993 chapter in *Crafts in the World Market* to illustrate the drawbacks and benefits of participating in cooperatives. Since 1993 Brenda has gone on to form Mayan Hands in her native Guatemala (www.mayanhands.org), and I co-founded Weaving for Justice in New Mexico (www.weaving-for-justice.org). As in many of the chapters in this volume, two fonts are used to highlight the individual voices in the work. Although I use Antonia's words from our collaborative book (which are rendered in italics here), I am the sole author of this chapter.

4. For explanations of the cultural significance and meaning of weaving symbols, see Morris 1987 and Morris et al. 2011.

5. These figures are an estimate from the beginning of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

6. See Vargas-Cetina 2005 for a discussion of contemporary cooperatives in Chiapas as "ephemeral associations," dependent on grassroots support organizations, in contrast to co-ops in earlier periods of Mexican history that received government support.

7. Paulina attended middle school with a scholarship from Weaving for Justice, and Rosalva received support from the Maya Educational Foundation (www.mayaedufound.org).

8. Adriana Manago's research with young Maya women who have migrated to the city of San Cristóbal (2012) and on value differences across generations in Zinacantán (2014) reveals how young women negotiate issues of family closeness and differing perspectives and in the process show elders how new behaviors and values can help them adapt to changing circumstances, without losing dearly held values and practices.

9. See Manago and Greenfield 2011 for the experiences of four Maya women in the forefront of social change in San Cristóbal de las Casas and the obstacles they overcame.

