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# Ideas: Indigenous Historical Agency in Revolutionary Western Mexico

## On Indigenous Politics and Political Revolution in Mexico and Beyond

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When I began the research project that became *Soldiers, Saints and Shamans*, I had two aims in mind. One was essentially political: to better understand why ethnic mobilizations and radical political movements have so often clashed, with important consequences for so many of the revolutions (and counter-revolutions) of the twentieth century. Studying the participation of the Wixárika (Huichol), Náayari (Cora), O'dam (Southern Tepehuan), and Mexicanero (Nahuatl-speaking) peoples of the Gran Nayar in the Mexican Revolution seemed to me to be an opportunity to shed further light on this complex issue, which seemed all the more relevant in the early 2010s as "identity politics" became increasingly important in the US and UK; as Berber, Tuareg, Druze and Kurdish minorities played key roles in uprisings in Libya, Mali and Syria; and Indigenous militia groups became prominent protagonists in Mexico's own, ongoing "Drug War" (Gledhill 2015; Ley, Mattiace and Trejo 2019).

My research also had a more specific historigraphical aim: to reconstruct how and why the Mexican Revolution—the first of the great social revolutions of the twentieth century, and the third of the major political transformations Mexico has undergone since the Spanish invasion of 1519—unfolded as it did in the Gran Nayar, a peripheral "shatter zone" in many ways comparable to James C. Scott's Zomia (2009, 8), and a stronghold of societies that Pierre Clastres (1974) might have praised for their attitudes towards (or, indeed, against) the state (cf. Neurath 2011). As a region that has received much attention from anthropologists but, with a few important exceptions (for example, Lira 2020; Rojas 1993), has been comparatively neglected by historians of modern Mexico, focusing on the Gran Nayar seemed to me to offer a chance, as Alan Knight generously put it a few pages back, to "fill a gap" in the historical record in a way that would also help to ground in historical "fact" the ever-expanding anthropological literature on the region, its peoples, and on Indigenous Mexico more generally.

However, as my research progressed and I spent more and more time doing "anthrohistorical" fieldwork in the Gran Nayar, making friends with local people and taking part in the many rituals, ceremonies, and fiestas that still help to define life in the region, a third aim became increasingly important: to understand (at least in part), and hopefully make (somewhat) understandable to other outsiders, the idiosyncratic, ritual-centred, important and often beautiful ways in which the forebears of today's Wixárika, Náayari, O'dam, and Mexicanero people understood the world and their place in it, and how these were transformed by, and in their own ways helped to shape (at least at the local level), both the Mexican Revolution and the reimagined Mexican nation-state that emerged from it.

I am therefore immensely grateful to *Anthropologica* for publishing Paul Liffman's comprehensive review of *Soldiers, Saints and Shamans* in this issue, and for inviting two other distinguished authorities on the ethnography of the Gran Nayar, Johannes Neurath and Philip Coyle, as well as one of the world's foremost historians of the Mexican Revolution, Alan Knight, to comment on both Liffman's review and on the book itself. The work of all four of these scholars has had a huge influence on my own, and their detailed, generous, and thought-provoking critiques of my book have helped me to reflect further on how far I have managed to fulfil my three aims.

Happily, all four of my reviewers seem to agree with my analysis of the causes of conflict between Indigenous communities and revolutionary forces in the Gran Nayar, which have parallels throughout the Global South, from Vietnam to Nicaragua (Goscha 2016; Hale 1994). Sources of friction included the nationalist ethnocentrism or even outright racism of revolutionary policies; the messianic arrogance, youthful romanticism, or simple greed of the officials charged with implementing these policies; and the legacies of deeper histories of popular and paramilitary violence, religious fundamentalism, and state-sponsored settler-colonialism that threatened Indigenous communal landholdings. In particular, both Liffman and Coyle highlight the contemporary global resonance of the racist and assimilationist education policies implemented in the Gran Nayar, which included the abduction of Wixárika, Náayari, O'dam, and Mexicanero children and their incarceration in state boarding schools. Despite high-profile debates and soul-searching about similar practices in the United States, Canada, and Australia (Woolford 2015, 259–288), the toxic legacy of these schools has been completely ignored by both the Mexican state and civil society. I hope that my book—which I aim to publishe in a Spanish-language edition in Mexico within the next year or two—might help to increase awareness of such historical abuses.

As for my attempt to reconstruct how such a grand and inherently national event as the Mexican Revolution unfolded in a diverse and peripheral "shatter zone" like the Gran Nayar, it is heartening to note that all my reviewers seemed able to make sense of what Knight kindly describes as my "brave and successful attempt to order the chaos." There is no denying that this is a complex story, involving, at the last count, five different ethnic groups divided into twenty-seven different communities, led between 1910 and 1940 by thirty-four different caciques, all of whom employed a wide range of "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1986) as well as varying levels of outright violence in pursuit of their multiple goals. I am therefore very pleased that Liffman, from his perspective as an anthropologist, takes a positive view of my attempts to make this history and its meaning more comprehensible, both through frequent comparisons between the Gran Nayar and other Indigenous regions of Mexico and Latin America, and through the "systematic scaling of local actors to national-level historical processes (and vice versa)." And, likewise, that Knight views the final outcome as a valuable "history of agency" that shows how narratives of "Indigenous inertia … were based on prejudice rather than fact."

Along the way, I've argued that this case study challenges several popular interpretations of developments in Mexico as a whole between 1910 and 1940: in particular, the idea that the revolutionary state genuinely negotiated with Indigenous Mexicans over the direction of social, political, and economic reforms; that rural education programs really sought to "liberate" Indigenous people from oppression; and that the Cristero Rebellion was about popular religiosity rather than broader issues of local cultural and political autonomy.

However, it is also worth noting here that, despite Liffman's doubts, one concept I do not really take issue with is Knight's concept of *serranos* and *agraristas*. In fact, I am very pleased that Knight recognizes his original ideas here (Knight 1986, vol.1: 115–117), which I have also used in subsequent work on the Mexican drug trade (Morris 2020), while at the same time trying to drill down further into this deliberately and inherently broad categorization to show that it can be useful even at the most micro level.

Perhaps it is fitting that the most critical comments from my reviewers—and particularly from the anthropologists among them—have come in response to the third major aim of my book: that of foregrounding the role of Indigenous beliefs, practices, and worldviews in shaping an important historical conjuncture, in a way that respects and reflects the ways in which the inhabitants of the Gran Nayar still understand the world and their own place within it. Because of my training as a historian and my attempts to engage a broad but ultimately academic audience (and my desire, I suppose, to one day secure a permanent academic job), my book remains to a significant degree bound by the norms of the academy, of history as a discipline, and of the "rationalist" world of historical facts and linear time. In response to both Coyle's and Neurath's suggestions that I might be bolder in attempting to move away from such perspectives in my analysis, I can only plead that I still have several decades of learning about *costumbre* to do first.

Meanwhile, despite the fact that *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans* remains a recognizably "Western" historical text, the influence of the so-called "ontological turn" on my analytical approach to identity and ethnicity has also caused some disagreement. Without getting into debates that go far beyond my arguments about the potentially shamanic roots of "cosmopolitan" *caciquismo* in the Gran Nayar, I would simply say, in response to Liffman's point, that the continued local suspicion of Indigenous individuals who have received a "mestizo education" is, I think, less about education per se and more about how it is used,

especially in the context of the different ways in which political power ebbs and flows in Gran Nayar communities (Lira Larios 2018; Neurath 2011). This, I would argue, explains why the Wixárika leader Pedro de Haro, who was born an *actual* mestizo, was simultaneously a hero to some Wixáritari and an enemy and/or "traitor" to others, even within his adopted community of San Sebastián (Benítez 1968). I would also suggest, hopefully, that the final word on such debates will rest with a new generation of Mexican scholars—including some, such as Selene Galindo Cumplido, Honorio Mendía Soto, and Tutupika Carrillo de la Cruz, who come from the Gran Nayar itself, and whose innate knowledge and understanding of the linguistic, cultural, and political complexities of the region already far exceeds anything I could aspire to.

Women scholars will also, I hope, be better able to address Coyle's points about issues of gender and patriarchy in the Gran Nayar (the contemporary existence of which I think is undeniable, but whose roots may well have more to do with the political and cultural upheaval that the Revolution brought to the Gran Nayar than I, as an outsider and a man, have been able to document) (Gamlin, 2020).

Finally, to end on a point of agreement among my reviewers, I am pleased that they have all echoed my ultimately hopeful conclusions about the extraordinary resilience of the peoples of the Gran Nayar and the longevity of their distinctive beliefs, practices, and worldviews, which continue to inform their ongoing struggles for territorial, cultural, and political autonomy. Neurath notes, for example, the recent successful participation of the Wixárika "deified ancestors" in legal battles to save their sacred sites from destruction by Canadian mining companies.

I would also like to draw attention to the way in which shamans and other ritual specialists from all four peoples of the region, in concert with their ancestors and all the other non-human inhabitants of the Gran Nayar, have helped to lead political negotiations with the Mexican state that led to the agreement of a "Justice Plan" for the region in 2022. The plan officially recognizes local rights to self-government, control of territory, defence against insecurity, and promises state protection for the *costumbre* whose revolutionary-era history I recount in my book, and which still remains so central to life in the Gran Nayar today.

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