

# Our Zapotec Ethnic Identity

Manuel Ríos Morales

We, the Zapotec from the northern mountains in Oaxaca, Mexico, are a group related linguistically and culturally to other Zapotec groups from the valley, the isthmus and the southern mountains. Even though our dialects differ we share the same historical consciousness, a geographical space and similar cultural traditions. We use our differences and similarities to express our particular identity in the context of our national society, which is composed of diverse ethnic identities.

At the regional level our Zapotec identity is recognized in language, in culture and in a shared geography. At district levels, we, who live in the areas of Zoogocho, Yalalag and part of Villa Alta y Cajonos, define ourselves as the *Be'ne'xon*, to distinguish from the *Be'ne'xisha*, Zapotec from Talca; the *Be'ne'reg*, Zapotec from the area of Ixtlan and the *Be'ne'rashe*, Zapotec from the Valley. And at the local level, our Zapotec ethnic identity is defined by the particular historical-structural conditions of our communities of birth — poverty, exploitation, dialect, local culture.

After more than three centuries of colonial destruction, more than a century of political independence with its forces of social disintegration and cultural assimilation, and a decade of overwhelming modernization in the sixties, our identities emerge today with a new strength, a greater awareness of self-preservation and human dignity. Despite the impact of modernization, we have maintained important parts of our culture — such as our cosmology, our communal organization, our language — all important elements in sustaining our identity.

Zapotec ethnic identity has also been preserved by music. In our region, each town has its own music band, small or large. Music is intimately associated with community life, an important element of social cohesion, a language with which to express joy, nostalgia, abundance or deprivation. The music of the region is common to Zapotec, Mixes and Chinotec groups. It includes a variety of marches, waltzes, *boleros*, *fantasías*, *sones* and *jarabes*. These musical rhythms are heard in all religious festivities and social events.

Another distinctive trait of Zapotec ethnic identity is the social group formed for communal work and reciprocal help known as *shin-raue* and *gson*. Through these native institutions, the community meets social needs and collaborates in public works when the need arises. Communal labor is not only a way of working; it is also a strategy for defending identity and sharing responsibility which has allowed our peoples to survive as distinct groups.

Recent Zapotec migrations have made the Valley of Mexico, the city of Oaxaca, and Los Angeles, California, new spaces of conquest and establishment of Zapotec cultures. Migration is not only the physical removal of our brothers and sisters, but also the transfer of traditions, values, beliefs, feelings and patterns of day-to-day life into the new settlement areas. Beginning in the fifties, various migrant voluntary associations have emerged: the Zoogocho Fraternal Union in Mexico City, the Zoogocho Unifying Front in Oaxaca and the Zoogocho Social Union of Los Angeles in California.

As contemporary natives, we recognize the great responsibility we have within the structure of our national society. We recognize that the problem before us is how to overcome the contradictions inherent in every dynamic society, such as marginalization, domination, discrimination, self-contempt and self-degradation. We believe that the essence of our identity will endure at least 500 more years, but we also recognize that if we do not assert our own demands, we will continue to have the status of a minority.

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