

Alicia Barabas and

IWGIA Document

Miguel Bartolomé:

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The Mazatec and Chinantec People of  
Oaxaca, Mexico**

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HYDRAULIC DEVELOPMENT AND ETHNOCIDE:  
THE MAZATEC AND CHINANTEC PEOPLE  
OF OAXACA, MEXICO

Copenhagen 1973

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For the Secretariat of IWGIA

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The aim of this report is to call attention to a program of ethnocide which is being applied to ethnic minorities in Mexico as a part of a policy of capitalist development being carried out by the Mexican government through regional development agencies. It can be shown that ethnocidal policies of these agencies have an intimate relationship with the broad economic and political goals of the federal government. An examination of past and present treatment of Mazatec and Chinantec peoples<sup>1)</sup>, for example, illustrates how a policy of cultural extermination serves the needs of the Mexican state. We shall see that both the National Indigenista Institute (INI) and the Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources (SRH) share a common aim: the incorporation of the Indians into the national capitalist system of production and consumption by means of the elimination of their economic semi-independence and cultural identity. In other words, the objective is to incorporate the Indian into a rural proletariat: the SRH seeks to exploit Indian labor in order to increase regional economic production, whereas the INI seeks to develop a class consciousness devoid of any meaningful sense of ethnic identity. As anthropologists deeply concerned about a people with whom we have lived and worked, we shall try to reflect the Indian view while examining the causes and nature of recent ethnocidal process among the Mazatec and the same process now underway among the Chinantec.

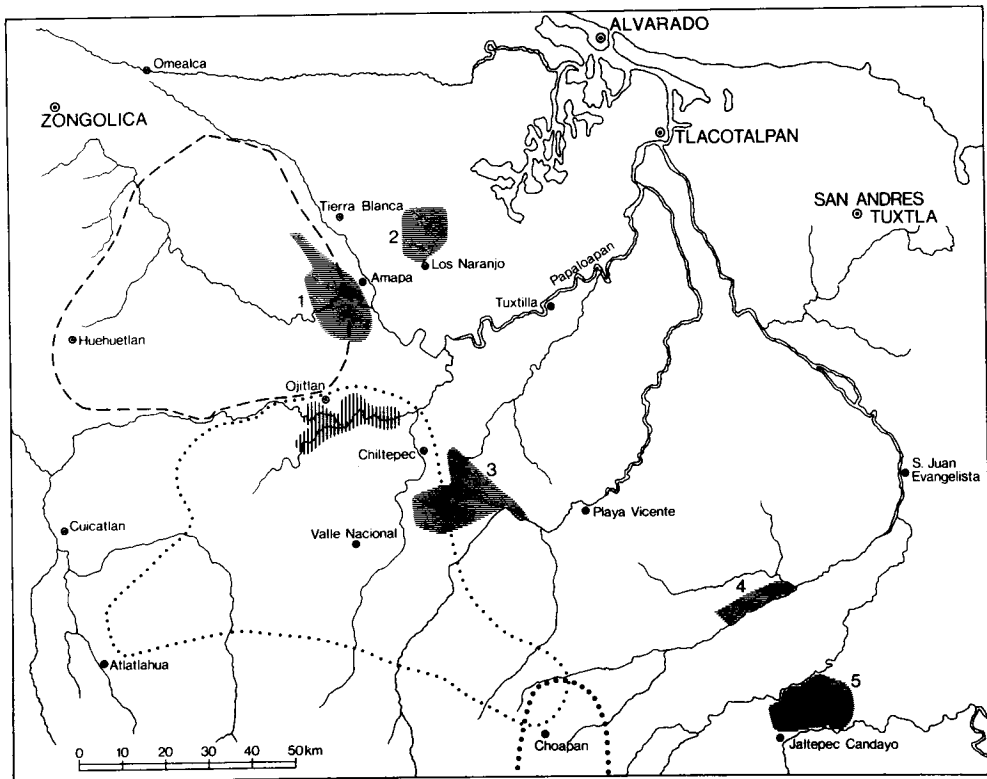
## I. A Regional Development Agency and its Style.






Irrigation has been important in Mexico at least since the Classic period of Teotihuacan Civilization. Such ancient antecedents speak clearly to the importance of control of hydraulic resources in the economic development of Mexico, a country which, despite increasing industrialization, remains basically agricultural. Thus the development of regional hydraulic systems or basins has been viewed since the 1940's as an essential ingredient in the growth of the modern Mexican economy. The justification of regional development programs is based on the purported need to incorporate areas of comparative backwardness into the national economic development.

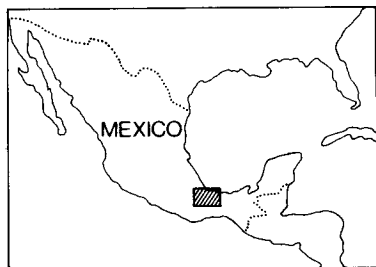
A series of commissions, administratively dependent on the Secretariat of Hydraulic Resources (SRH) now control most of Mexico's important basins. Among these is the Papaloapan River Commission which was created in 1947. The Commission was entrusted at that time with the planning and execution of an integral regional development similar to that of the Tennessee Valley Authority in the United States. The Commission administers an area of 46,517 square kilometers in the State of Veracruz and parts of the States of Oaxaca and Puebla.

The focus of the Commission's activities has been the construction of two large dams designed to provide irrigation and electrical energy. These dams have required the relocation of the Mazatec and Chinantec peoples, whose lands have been or will be flooded by the dams' artificial lakes. For example, the Miguel Aleman dam, built over the Tonto River between 1949 and 1955, displaced 20,000 Mazatecs; the initial work on the Cerro de Oro dam began in 1972 and will eventually displace as many Chinantecs.

By 1950 more than 40,000 hectares were planted in sugar cane in the Valley of the Papaloapan, a development which favors one of the biggest sugar refineries in the world, The Ingenio San Cristobal. The Commission has provided the refineries with both technical assistance and labor, since the Commission has stimulated the colonization of lowlands by mestizo peasants. Thus, peasants from various states have migrated to the region, tempted by promises of land, irrigation and electricity. The newly arrived settlers received irrigation for a two or three year period, then it was suspended<sup>2)</sup>. Without irrigation and lacking bank credits necessary for farming, the settlers were



-  Actual Mazatec zone
-  The five Mazatec resettlement zones
-  Actual Chinotec zone
-  Zone chosen for Chinotec resettlement
-  Zone which will probably be inundated by the Cerro de Oro dam



The location of the Papaloapan Basin

obliged to turn to the sugar refineries. The refineries have no need for cane workers or fields of their own since they can exploit more efficiently the small land-owners and ejidatarios of the surrounding region. That is, the peasants possess the land, but receive credit for seeds, fertilizers, insect control, weeding, and harvesting from refinery. These are subtracted from the cane-planters' final earnings, which in any case are fixed by the refineries. As a result, most planters are in continuous debt to them.

Between 1947 and 1964 more than 110 million dollars were invested in the area. The beneficiaries were 1) sugar refineries, 2) industries and urban areas which use electricity, 3) the cattle ranches in the down-river areas of the Papaloapan, 4) lumber interests and paper factories, and 5) the construction companies which have absorbed a large part of the project's budget. Quite understandable, over the years the Commission has been transformed into a "technocratic dominion" supported by powerful regional and national economic and political interests. Agency engineers and technocrats have come to act as mediators between the economic pressure groups and the Mestizo and Indian peasants in the process of regional exploitation.

## II. The Mazatec.

When construction of the Miguel Aleman dam was begun in 1949 there were 89,702 Mazatecs in the area. At the time 70 per cent were monolingual Mazatec speakers. There were four population centers in the downriver area of the Rio Tonto, each with a constellation of related settlements: San Felipe Jalapa de Diaz, San Jose Independencia, San Miguel Soyaltepec, and San Pedro Ixcatlan.

Five zones, located from 50 to 250 kilometers from the original Mazatec habitat, were designated for the resettlement of the Indian population. Four of these zones did not have access to lands being brought under irrigation by the dam. The evident fragmentation of the Mazatec population was not a consequence of insufficient nearby land. Rather, the best lands had already been distributed to employees of the Commission or to influential people who expected to benefit from the dam's irrigation



district. As compensation, the resettled people were offered roads, potable water, and electricity, but these promises were not fulfilled.

The Indians, believing that the Rio Tonto was uncontrollable were at first skeptical of the possibility of constructing a dam. When in 1954 many Mazatecs still persisted in refusing to move, the Commission provided a taste of its power by opening the dam's floodgates. This was complemented with the Commission's police setting fire to the huts of the most resistant.

Since 1954, the displaced Mazatec experience has been no less tragic: they did not receive irrigation or electricity and roads today are all but impassable due to lack of maintenance. The Mazatecs note with irony that "they built us roads by which to come but none by which to leave". Many have not received deeds to their lands, thus making them ineligible for agricultural credit. For others the transfer meant death. At least 200 simply died of depression (tristeza); the removal was especially hard on the aged, who grieved upon leaving lands where ancestors were buried and their sacred objects secure. The Indians were assigned lands according to their order of arrival, a policy which disrupted traditional family organization. They were obliged to buy corn on the open market and thus went into debt. Religious life was disrupted; they could no longer make offerings to the Chuma'he Mazateca who lives in the caves at Cerro Rabon and Boca de Tilpan and who waters the fields with her breasts. The new weather pattern and ecological situation also contributed to community maladaptation and economic dislocation. Alcoholism increased greatly, as traditional ceremonial life attenuated.

Under the dictum, "Todos somos mexicanos" (We are all Mexicans), Mazatecs, Chinantecs and mestizos were resettled in the same community, in some cases, alongside Mixes already living in the resettlement zone. The linguistic and cultural differences resulted in numerous incidents of violence that have increased rather than decreased with time. These results, however, could not have been more encouraging to those who had premeditated the cultural elimination of the Mazatec. This premeditation is self-evident in official documents. For example:

"The removal of the natives and their resettlement in a new environment does not represent a simple change of residence, but rather the beginnings of a change in their psychology, in their emotional lives and even in their customs. What has been achieved can be summarized by saying that they have jumped in a brief period many stages of historical evolution which peoples, by themselves, pass through very slowly. They are in a process of change from a tribal life to today's civilized life and they are integrating themselves rapidly thanks to the help they have received from the Papaloapan Commission and the Instituto Nacional Indigenista not only in material goods ... but in cultural benefits and in the moral help they have been receiving since they emerged from their previous isolation into a different world, which offers them more comforts and ample opportunity for well-being and prosperity ... " (Commission of Papaloapan. 1958:37).

It is instructive to compare this statement, whose ethnocentrism requires no comment, with the actual state of affairs in the five resettlement zones.

All of Zone 1 (Santa Maria) has fallen into the hands of the sugar interests. Without the promised water and electricity, and occupying lands of inferior quality, the Indians were forced to hire themselves out to the San Cristobal Refinery under the conditions of continuous indebtedness described above.

Zone 2 (Los Naranjos) has two population centers, Nueva Oaxaca and Nuevo San Jose Independencia. Parts of this zone were irrigated, but for only a period of two years (see note 2). The Nuevo Oaxaca settlers did not receive titles to the land they received in compensation. As a consequence of this and of pressure from mestizo colonists from Durango and Zacatecas, whose immigration was encouraged and directed by the Papaloapan Commission, the Mazatecs migrated, leaving at present only a dozen families. The four hundred Mazatecs resettled at Nuevo San Jose lack land titles and therefore cannot obtain loans from government agricultural banks, thus forcing their recourse to usurious money

lenders. Lacking the means to transport their produce to markets, they are dependent on mestizo brokers who buy their crops at unfair prices. They lack irrigation and electricity and their lands are seriously threatened by mestizos who, with the encouragement of the Commission, are attempting to form a new settlement.

In Zone 3 (La Joya), Mazatec and Chinantec were mixed with a Mixtec group that was native to the region. Sixteen people died in the first months of resettlement due to harsh conditions. The new lands have no water and are inferior to their old ones. An inadequate road makes the marketing of their meager surplus difficult, and as elsewhere, they fall back on various middlemen. Throughout the entire resettlement process the Commission has favored small landowners who were prepared to pay for land; those who received land as compensation often found that it was not even sufficient for subsistence farming. Indeed, more than 30 per cent of resettled population have abandoned their lands for this reason (Ballesteros, et al., 1970:109).

2,375 Mazatecs and 254 mestizos live in the fourth resettlement zone (Yogopi). Traditional Indian dress is being rapidly lost and the INI is discouraging the use of the Indian language in the schools. When taken to Yogopi the Mazatec cleared the brush and built their new houses, but the bad quality of the land, an extremely poor road, and the local mestizo merchants have created a situation in which more than 40 per cent of the lands originally granted to the resettled have changed owners. Pressed by debts, the Indians have sold their lands to their mestizo oppressors.

In the fifth Zone (San Felipe Cihualtepec), 996 Mazatecs, 930 Chinantecs, 80 Mixes and 382 mestizos live together. As in the other zones, the mestizos are in position to exploit the indigenous settlers, reflecting the policy of forced integration. Due to this, there were numerous fights between members of different ethnic groups. This forced integration, aided by the distance from the remaining ceremonial centers, the small number of older Indians who survived the resettlement and the loss of links with their original indigenous communities, has begun to bear fruit: some two decades after the resettlement, both the native language and the cultural identity of the Mazatec are being lost.

The general process may be summarized as follows: State policy, as executed by the Papaloapan Commission and the INI, has accelerated the acculturation of Indians and their integration in the national culture. These Indians, theoretically controlling the means of production but in fact exploited by mestizo brokers and money lenders and by sugar refineries, have been drawn into the national economy as a rural proletariat, providing the cheap labor so necessary for regional development.

### III. The Chinantec.

Although the Papaloapan Commission's policy was openly dictatorial during the construction of the Miguel Aleman dam and the subsequent Mazatec resettlement, several factors which have arisen in the intervening years have led to changes in tactics in the case of the Chinantec and the Cerro de Oro dam. First, the consolidation of local and national groups with interest and influence in the region has obliged the development agency to adopt more discrete and cautious strategies. At the same time, certain, quite limited, democratic reforms on the national level make necessary the participation, or at least the semblance of participation, of peasants and Indians in the resolution of problems affecting them. The policy of present government, translated to the regional level, has resulted in larger budgets for regional development agencies, and in the emergence of a new class of technocrats causing changes in the structure of the Commission as old economic interests are adapted to new political situations. Crass domination has been replaced by subtle manipulation, and the Commission police by local mediators who act through political parties and peasant associations. At the same time, other national institutions, such as DAAC (Department of Agrarian Affairs and Colonization), SRH, the national political parties, PRI (Party of Institutionalized Revolution) and its peasant organization, the CNC (National Confederation of Peasants), and PARM (Authentic Party of the Mexican Revolution) and its peasant organization, CCI (Independent Confederation of Peasants), construction companies, and local and regional interest groups are acting to protect and further their own interests in the region, often employing the same tactics as the Commission. The intrusion of these various groups with conflicting interests and similar opportunist tactics on the local Chinantec community creates a situation of chaos and limits the formation of local opposition.

In 1968, for example, local mediators in the Chinantec community of Ojitlan, attempted to destroy the power of the Council of Elders, who opposed the project, by eliminating the cargo system, which is the hierarchical system of religious posts through which one moved to become an Elder. Although the Council continues to function in secret and their decisions are still respected by a majority of the Chinantec, the municipal authorities, who represent the interests of the political parties, have gained considerable authority in village affairs. Unofficial and often contradictory rumors about the projected dam and the resettlement began to circulate in early 1972, creating disputes between local groups who felt they might be partially or totally affected. With the official announcement of the construction of the Cerro de Oro dam, conflict erupted on the local level between partisans of PRI and of PARM for control of the municipal authority. Accusations of misconduct were made, fights and other acts of violence took place, and the municipal government changed hands three times in a period of six months. It must be remembered that this conflict at the local level represents a conflict of interests between the two national political parties, and that these institutions, through local mediators, manipulate both information and political action groups on the local level.

The confusion and petty conflicts resulting from the manipulation of information by various super-local groups is itself a tactic. It serves to draw the Chinantec attention from the central problem, which is the choice of resettlement site. The actual choice of the area was the result of a struggle between super-local economic interests, involving the different regional development agencies. Finally, despite opposition from SRH and DAAC, the Commission chose as the resettlement site an area which lies between the Lalana and Trinidad rivers (see map), some 260 kilometers from the present Chinantec region<sup>3</sup>). The reason for the Papaloapan Commission decision are multiple: first of all, it avoids conflict with the large landowners. They are presently occupying the "area of irrigation" to be created by the new dam or otherwise own large areas of land which could not be easily expropriated for the benefit of the Chinantec; the political power of this group however, effectively prevents this taking place. At the same time, the Commission's decision does not affect plans for the intensive cultivation of lands which would

be difficult to carry out, they claim, if these were still held by Indians. Also, the type of soils in the proposed resettlement area are best adapted to a livestock economy whose development has always been a part of the Commission's regional planning.

The encouragement of livestock exploitation and the introduction of new technology by the Commission in various parts of the Papaloapan basin has considerably increased overall production. This change has generated many negative economic and social consequences. During the first resettlement so-called "solidarity groups" of about ten members were formed around a unit of land, and loans for buying of livestock and machinery are granted by the Banco Agropecuario. As a result of high interest on these loans (7.6 to 10.5 per cent), profits are realized only after two years and then do not amount to more than 400 pesos (32 dollars) per animal. As is well known, the exploitation of livestock requires far less labor than farming. Thus, of ten family members, only three or four were required to work. Creating an imbalance between the supply and demand for labor. Women and younger children, who formerly helped in the fields, have become a passive group, remaining at home. The traditionally large family, which made sense in an agricultural context, has become a disadvantage. Finally, we might note that the Commission arranges the sale of livestock and the distribution of profits, thereby directly controlling the marketing process.

Regardless of the consequences for the peasants, however, this system of exploitation achieved two major goals. Livestock operations increased regional productivity more than agricultural activity would have, which is, of course, the principal concern in regional development. It also transformed the Indian peasant into a dependent rural laborer, in fact if not in theory. The Indian has been incorporated into the national economy and has begun to become acculturated to the national culture. As we have stated before, this has been a principal aim of the agencies involved in regional development.

The Papaloapan Commission's position nevertheless has been opposed by other agencies. For example, the SRH has argued for moving the displaced indigenous groups to the irrigation zone that the dam will create; in this way those Chinantecs who were

at first inconvenienced by the dam would come to profit from it. Moreover, this area, still within traditional Chinantec territory, is not far from their present habitat, and would thus favor cultural continuity. But as we have already pointed out, the large landowners, with the backings of various regional interests and the Commission, have subverted this proposed policy alternative.

The National Indigenista Institute (INI) has taken no firm position as a matter of political administrative self-interest. It is remarkable, nonetheless, that an institution in charge of the "improvement" of Indian standards of living should remain at the margin of such a significant question as resettlement. Clearly, the essential aim of INI is to involve itself only in the final, accommodating stage of the process, as occurred during the first resettlement.

In summary, the prospect for the Chinantec is removal of half of their population from an extensive segment of their present habitat to another, already populated area and the probable transformation of their farming economy into one of livestock production.

Along with the prospect of removal and the consequent economic exploitation that will be carried out under the new politics of subtle manipulation, we can also anticipate a program of ethnocide. Numerous social and economic studies of the Chinantec community are being completed at this moment under the guise of humanitarian research but with the fundamental political intention of persuading the Indian of the inevitability of change. These studies are also required by the international loan agencies (World Bank, Interamerican Development Bank) involved in financing Commission projects. This does not mean that there is any possibility these studies will conclude that, for the sake of the Chinantec, the dam should not be constructed. The only social objective under consideration is the great leap forward for change and progress. Within this scheme, the intent is to relieve the Chinantec, once and for all, after four hundred years of conquest and domination, of the burden of maintaining their own language, a coherent system of social and kinship organization, and an integrated relationship with a cosmos of their own conception. That is to say, it is to eliminate their culture and incorporate them into a single capi-

talist mode of development.

Inasmuch as this is the effective intent of the regional development agencies, it does not take much to visualize the impact of the dam on the twenty thousand people to be affected. There will ensue a separation from traditional ceremonial centers; a destruction of vital kinship ties; a rapid and progressive loss of language and traditional religion; conflict between generations (since many elders will not accept the move); a radical change in social and political organization; and, finally, the probable death from depression of many upon leaving the lands and rites of their ancestors.

These issues may not be considered significant by politicians and promoters of economic development, but we should also mention the economic dislocation to which the Chinantec will be subjected. A traditional system of agriculture and concomitant religious superstructure will be changed into an exploitative system of informal credit in which money-lenders will mediate between the Indians and agricultural supply firms. We may conclude by saying that regional development has very little to offer economically marginal ethnic groups under present circumstances.

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The Chinantec have been betrayed, essentially by the bilingual mediators; Indians whose reference group is mestizo society and who have used their ability to speak Spanish and their positions in the municipal authority, which they share with mestizo exploiters, to act as instruments of the Commission. Nonetheless, the traditional majority has begun to react openly against this manipulation of the situation.

As has been pointed out, the traditional representative organ, the council of elders and the Mayordomia system which regulated access to eldership, were suppressed in 1968 and the municipal system of offices which formed a part of this system has been taken over by mestizos and bilingual Indians. The elders, nevertheless, still have considerable influence within the large monolingual community and with those bilingual Chinantec who have a strong ethnic consciousness. Various actions have been initiated



by the elders to cope with their situation. Around the middle of 1972 the shamans of Ojitlan, by order of the elders, tried by means of their companion spirits to kill the President of Mexico, although they failed because of the efforts of the President's own spirits. This failure and the sense of helplessness that followed have led to an incipient messianic movement. On the twelfth of December, 1972, the Virgin of Guadalupe appeared in the cave of a nearby hill opposing the construction of the dam and asking that the president and the priests of the municipio come to speak with her. This apparition has developed into a cult centered on pieces of wood found at the site of her appearance. The pieces of wood have been carried by hundred of people in various processions, and the place of her appearance has continuously been visited by many Chinantec pilgrims.

In the same month the Devil appeared at Cerro de Oro, the site of the new dam and a sacred place for the Chinantecs asking that the engineers leave and that the President of Mexico come to settle accounts. According to popular belief, these appearances have been accompanied by the deaths of several engineers. In the early part of 1973 God's own engineer appeared and argued against the construction of the dam.

It is perfectly clear that these phenomena are an expression of a culture threatened by disintegration and which at the same time has found no practical manner to exercise its rights. The incipient messianic movement has accomplished what politicians, engineers, businessmen, and false mediators have tried to prevent: the unity of the Chinantec people in the face of pressures from the regional and national society. The apparitions have also served to strengthen traditional culture and ethnic consciousness. Although it is too early to say, it would not be surprising if the Chinantecs should decide to adopt violent means in defense of their homeland and way of life.

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The policy of the National Indigenista Institute, as expressed by Dr. Gonzalo Aguirre Beltran, Mexico's leading authority on indigenismo, is the forced integration of the Indian. Efforts of the INI Regional Coordinating Centers<sup>4)</sup> are directed toward

the acceleration of the acculturation process. It would be useless therefore to subject the actions of the hydraulic agency to review by INI. We recognize that INI could disagree with the coercive methods of the Papaloapan Commission, but in the last analysis the aims of both institutions coincide. This is apparent in a statement made by Aguirre Beltran, which appeared in the newspaper El Dia (8/12/72), copies of which were circulated throughout all the Coordinating Centers as an expression of official policy:

"The purpose is still integration and in no way to develop in them (N.B. Mexico's Indian population) an ethnic consciousness that separates them from the rest of the nation. It is necessary to change their cast-like position to a class position, where the possibility exists that the Indian may enter a group, in this case the proletariat"... (Aguirre Beltran, 1972:3).

In view of this statement, we can understand the silence of official indigenismo with respect to the choice of the resettlement zone. The choice of the site will not prevent systematic ethnocide from being carried out, under the rubric "integration of the nation":

"The indigenous societies - rural and isolated within their self-sufficient economy and technological backwardness - try to conserve modes of life which they consider acceptable, but which constitute an obstacle to the integration of a common nationality and nation". (Aguirre Beltran. 1973 a:223).

Despite lipservice to the principle of cultural relativity in professional anthropology, official indigenismo does not really accept the historical existence of cultures that possess territorial and cultural rights that are prior to and apart from those of the nation.

The desperate effort of the Chinantec against the threat of the desintegration of Chinantecan society is being ignored by those who manipulate their destinies. The indigenista ideo-

logy is " against the artificial creation of Indian nationalities which do not exist" (Aguirre Beltran, 1973 a:1). Despite a thousand years of existence and four hundred years of resistance to the colonial process the cultural reality of the Chinantec Nation is being ignored and the Chinantecs are being denied the rights to a separate cultural existence.

The official indigenistas are aware that indigenous movements to resist integration are contrary to their interests. The supression of the Chinantec Council of Elders is a consequence of the indigenista ideology, because of the importance of traditional authorities in maintaining cultural continuity: "This situation must be corrected sooner or later by inducing modifications which lessen the prestige of traditional authority and strengthens the position of the legal government". (Aguirre Beltran, 1973 b:246).

The failure to accept cultural pluralism and the resistance of groups such as the Chinantec to forced integration with western society is evident in the attitude of official indigenismo to "Indian Power" movements, which attempt to raise the ethnic consciousness of indigenous peoples:

If the regional and parochial populations (the Indians) of Mexico do not share in an national consciousness, the changes which they experience as the inevitable consequence of their contact with modern culture could bring them -- as has happened in the nations which we mention -- to the organisation of a panindian movement that could lead them to the formation of a second nationality. As such an event is contrary to goals of national formation the education for integration carried out among the Indian population should complement the education of the dominant population" (Aguirre Beltran 1973:259).

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As the Mazatec and Chinantec cases illustrate, the economic and political processes in regional development, resulting from the the actions of official agencies and other capitalist interest groups, inevitably involves the manipulation of Indian

populations and the destruction of their traditional forms of social organization. The policy of the indigenistas, as carried out by the National Indigenista Institute, is explicitly directed towards the destruction of indigenous cultures and the integration of ethnic minorities into the lowest and most exploited stratum of the national class structure. This ideology is not difficult to understand, however, if we realize that ethnocide is an inevitable consequence of the socio-economic domination of internal as well as external colonialism.

Given the actual political circumstances and the commitment of the Mexican state to a policy of capitalist development, the possibilities of modifying or terminating these situations of exploitation and ethnocide are almost non-existent. The efforts of ethnic minorities to conserve their proper identity are stymied or manipulated by national power groups. For similar reasons, professionals who are concerned about these situations all find their resources limited. But we feel that the minimal obligation of such professionals is to delineate and to denounce the ideologies and tactics of this systematic ethnocide.

## NOTES

- 1) The Mazatec and Chinantec people live in the State of Oaxaca, Mexico. They belong to the linguistic classification, Oto-Mangue, and form two of the largest Indian groups in Mexico.
- 2) Apparently there existed problems with the design of the Miguel Aleman dam, such that it was not possible to put the planned irrigation program into effect. The Papaloapan Commission then turned to a system of hydraulic pumps that extracted the water from the Tonto River; however, its high cost and the lack of maintenance of the pumps caused their rapid deterioration and eventually, their inutility.
- 3) In July of 1973 the site of the resettlement zone, in the area of Choapan, was officially announced by the Papaloapan Commission.
- 4) The INI Coordinating Centers employ agricultural and livestock specialists, teachers and bilingual promoters. This staff is generally under the direction of an anthropologist and their duty is to accelerate the process of change and at the same time "protect the Indians".

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