

Mother Seeds in Resistance from the Lands of Chiapas: Mayan Peoples Defend Mexican Corn

By Peter Brown

"For us, the indigenous, corn is sacred. If these agro-chemical companies are trying to get rid of our corn, it is like wanting to get rid of a part of our culture which we inherited from our Mayan ancestors. We know that corn is our primary and daily food, it is the base of our culture."

Zapatista Education Promoter at the National Forum in Defense of Mexican Corn Mexico City, January 2002

With a careful examination of the tiny test strip every person present convinced themselves that the pink line indicating contamination by genetically engineered contamination was missing. A visible sigh of relief seemed to fill the room and flow through the crowd of tense Mayan men and women. The test strip was carefully affixed to the previously labeled plastic bag of chemical solvent and newly picked corn leaves while another test strip was examined by the assembly. The long day of discussion and corn testing that followed was an emotional roller coaster for everyone as several dozen farmers from the two ethnic groups of the northern region of Chiapas tabulated results and picked the brains of the small team of non-indigenous visitors cooperating with the Mother Seeds in Resistance project.

"We are happy when our corn is still natural," explained one young indigenous woman who had spent that entire spring day exploring the intricacies of field testing corn for transgenic markers. "There is still much that we need to learn about these genetic modifications, but we know we do not want what the big corporations are sending because we want our food to be pure and our corn to be natural."

Our small delegation of Mexican and U.S. activists had arrived several days earlier to attend the dedication of a major new education center the Zapatistas had constructed over the last three years using funds raised by our parent organization, Schools for Chiapas. In addition, we carried with us several dozen kits for the field testing of corn for transgenic contamination plus a heavy cargo of instructions, suggestions, and information from our departing staff scientist Dr. Martin Taylor.

Staff Scientist Is Lost to Love

For two years Martin had poured his extraordinarily focused energy and internationally acclaimed scientific talent into Mother Seeds in Resistance from the Lands of Chiapas. On the heels of winning vindication in his university tenure battle, Dr. Taylor drove our ancient pick-up from his home in Tucson to Chiapas. Once there, he proceeded to endure numbing long distance bus rides, taught

innumerable classes to indigenous teachers and students about transgenic contaminations, testified before NAFTA-created environmental bodies, dreamed up innovative laboratory techniques for long term preservation of corn, and designed extensive field testing protocols applicable to insurrectionary, indigenous Chiapas. It seemed that nothing could derail Martin until a visit from cupid sent Dr. Taylor racing off to his ancestral home in Australia with new bride in tow; his head filled with visions of hearth, home, and babies.

Like most Schools for Chiapas personnel Martin was a volunteer. In fact, he was a volunteer who in an act of extraordinary generosity used his own money to purchase project equipment such as the freezer that now holds indigenous seed in long term storage in the highlands of Chiapas. Like our hosts, the indigenous Zapatistas of Chiapas, Schools for Chiapas has always been more successful in generating visions and hope than in raising funds so, naturally, there was no budget to hire a new staff scientist when Dr. Taylor succumbed to the cupid's call.

After all of Martin's careful instruction and encouragement our team felt capable of carrying on the work. Still, the absence of Dr. Taylor left our little team of non-scientists a bit nervous as the Good Government Board of the North who call themselves "The New Seed That is Going to Produce" began to contact communities by radio and messengers urging an immediate collection of seed for national and international solidarity distribution and a collection of corn leaves so that testing for GMO contamination could proceed in the north of Chiapas.

"Here the People Command and the Government Obeys"

Therefore, it was with some trepidation on that morning in April, 2004 that I watched as Chol and Tzeltal farmers arrived in droves for the important religious and civil school dedication ceremonies which were to take place that day in the civilian government center. During massive celebrations just eight months earlier the autonomous, indigenous government of the north of Chiapas had assumed their provocative yet fitting title of "The New Seed Which is Going to Produce". Now it seemed appropriate that the Good Government Board serving the entire north of Chiapas would call upon their communities to bring a part of their first corn harvest to this important community gathering. Unfortunately the celebratory school dedications as well as the productive spring harvest were shadowed by threats of GMO contamination imported from my country.

Throughout that long morning, dozens of farmers and their families arrived carrying the fruits of months of backbreaking agricultural labor. As the burning tropical sun rapidly gained strength, I was struck by the similarity of an almost ceremonial entrance on the part of every farming family who arrived from towns located throughout several counties governed by the insurrectionary Zapatista governments. No sooner would a dusty pickup crammed full of indigenous people arrive than several men would dramatically leap

out, turning back quickly to reverently receive packages of corn leaves and bags of multicolored seed from the hands of sons and daughters, mothers and grandparents.

The unique mixture of joy and sadness which had marked my mood all morning deepened with each arrival. Everyone knew and was excited to think that the colorful seed corn was designated for solidarity growing by supporters across Mexico and around the world. Nevertheless these distant "grow outs" were necessitated by the threat of genetic contamination and everyone realized that extensive contaminations might be discovered during the planned genetic testing.

Although each genetic test required only a small leaf sample, occasionally a farmer who had not fully understood instructions would bring an entire ten foot high corn plant uprooted from his jungle milpa and adorned by several massive corn ears. After several of these beautiful mature plants ended up resting against the mural adorning the offices of the municipal governments, my spirits rose dramatically. As bursts of howler monkey cries endorsed her flight, a joyful white peace dove centering the mural appeared to be propelled into flight by the shining stalks of powerful Mayan corn. I settled down to participate in the greeting of each farmer inside the municipal building which was doubling as our dormitory and genetic testing laboratory.

It was actually inside this tin roofed and dirt floored, wooden building that the evolving ceremony of corn continued and deepened. After ceremoniously receiving their corn packages from the arriving trucks, each man ambled toward the colorful, but ramshackle office of their county governments. They entered silently without bothering to knock or ask permission. After blinking eyes adjusted to the relative darkness of the windowless building and silence allowed the newcomers to survey the scene, greetings were gently murmured in Chol or Tzeltal. Occasionally a Spanish word or two crept into these initial welcomes when the official and the newly arriving farmer happened to not speak the same language.

For our team of outsiders the silences between greetings often seemed uncomfortably long, the wait for an official of the appropriate language group interminable, and the ensuing exchange in incomprehensible languages; well, incomprehensible. But indigenous Chiapas is a time machine where life is viewed in generations and a calm dignity seems to extend tolerance to infinity. It was with this infinite indigenous dignity that detailed explanations were offered by Zapatista officials and carefully considered by rank and file Zapatista man and women.

Zapatista officials calmly explained their request of farmers to donate seed, their decision to send seed outside of Chiapas, and their decision to test corn for transgenic contamination. After actively participating in this process with questions and comments, the men often returned with wives, sons, daughters, and grandparents initiating a new round of greetings, explanations, questions, and

commentary. Although I could understand few of the Chol and Tzeltal words, the dignity and respect evident in the exchanges between officials and visiting farmers made me think of the proclamation which graces the ubiquitous Zapatista signs along roads and beside towns throughout Chiapas. From the highlands to the jungles these signs of the autonomous, indigenous Good Government Boards always declare "You are in Zapatista territory in rebellion - here the people command and the government obeys." (ESTA USTED EN TERRITORIO ZAPATISTA EN REBELDIA AQUI MANDA EL PUEBLO Y EL GOBIERNO OBEDECE)

Zapatista Adventures in Genetic Testing - Part I

Later in the day when our team was told that the visiting farmers were ready to meet, we hurried to gather our entire team in the county government headquarters. The Schools for Chiapas team arrived about the same time as dozens of indigenous men and women. Immediately our small and nervous group of outsiders received an extended welcome in Spanish from representatives of the Good Government Board. Everyone paid close attention as the warm greeting was carefully translated into Chol and Tzeltal.

Then the autonomous authorities turned toward the several dozen assembled community representatives and began. "We the autonomous indigenous authorities of "The New Seed That Is Going to Produce" have asked you bring your corn seed and your corn leaves today to begin a new resistance to the transgenic contaminations that are being sent here from the United States by the big companies with the support of the bad government," stated the Chol teacher and Zapatista official who the night before had told our group of his personal concerns for the purity of his corn crop and the health of his community. "You have heard the welcome of the Good Government Board to those from Mother Seeds in Resistance who have traveled here from far away to teach us about transgenic corn. Our friends tell us that some people in Mexico and some people in other parts of the world will grow our corn in their own lands. We believe this is a good thing. We also think that it will be good for us today to begin to learn how to test our corn to see if it is pure. Without these little tests we cannot see the transgenics which are attacking our corn. Thank you for listening. Thank you, that is all my words. I hope that you have understood what I mean to say and that nothing I have said has offended anyone. Thank you and that is all my words."

As this classic Zapatista closing was translated into Chol and Tzeltal I felt slightly dizzy as I saw another profound Zapatista adventure beginning to unfold before my eyes. I was certain this new adventure would offer the profound rewards and unforeseen challenges members of Schools for Chiapas have repeatedly experienced over ten years of working with the autonomous, Mayan peoples of Chiapas. And I was certain that all of us would be changed in the process.

Background to the Zapatista movement

In just a few pages I will return to describe more about this new adventure. However I find that the project known as "Mother Seeds in Resistance from the Lands of Chiapas" or "Mother Seeds in

Resistance" for short, is very difficult to describe without first explaining a little bit about the Zapatista uprising. Therefore I want to now digress briefly in order to explain a few terms and give some context for examining contemporary Mayan resistance to GE or GMO corn contamination in Chiapas, Mexico.

The civilian center where the events above unfolded in the spring of 2004 is one of five such Zapatista centers in Chiapas known as "Caracoles" which previously known as "Aguascalientes". Caracoles are actual geographic centers where those from outside of indigenous Chiapas can come to meet and share ideas with those from the inside of indigenous Chiapas. For Zapatistas the Caracole (which is usually translated as snail in English) is metaphorically and actually a place where the inside meets the outside - where Mayan communities can come to know indigenous and non-indigenous communities from throughout the world. The term "caracol" is often translated into English as "snail"; however in today's Chiapas the term has come to more exactly signify the swirling interior of both land and sea shells - especially the conch which was used as a bugle in pre-Columbian America and the river snails that are common in Chiapas. In addition to serving as meeting place with outsiders, the Caracoles are home to Indian run hospitals and schools, indigenous governments and independent peace observers, Maya productive projects such as women's cooperatives and coffee producers' cooperatives, and a myriad of basketball courts and various sports fields. The Zapatista movement burst on the international and Mexican scene on New Years Eve, January 1, 1994, with the almost bloodless military occupation of the five major cities of the highlands of Chiapas. Thousands of poorly armed; mostly monolingual, indigenous rebel soldiers poured into the cities as tens of thousands of unarmed Mayan community members felled trees and dug ditches across major highways to slow the inevitable advance of Mexican government troops. The rebels immediately proclaimed a law guarantying rights for indigenous women and denounced the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) which took effect that very morning. Specifically, the Zapatista insisted that if fully implemented NAFTA would mean the end of indigenous life in Chiapas and throughout Mexico.

The armed Mayan rebels who occupied cities certainly engaged the undivided attention of the national and international media - and of the Mexican military. Headlines and colorful photos throughout the world described armed insurrection as the indigenous response to the first day of NAFTA while tens of thousands of unarmed Mayan peasants, Zapatista and non-Zapatista alike, moved to seize and occupy farming lands through out the southern most Mexican state of Chiapas. As the armed Mayan rebels began an orderly retreat from the five cities, many retreated to land seized by their kith and kin during the occupation of the cities and the battles that followed. As the late political gadfly, muck raking journalist, and Chiapas lawyer Lic. Amado Avendano often commented, "In that one short evening the Zapatistas gained more justice for the indigenous of Chiapas than I

have been able win in thirty years representing indigenous clients before Mexican courts."

Meanwhile the articulate words of Zapatista spokespeople and documents flew around the world on electronic wings of the rapidly growing internet combating the misinformation and lies spread by the Mexican establishment and the CIA about the charismatic rebels. After just two weeks of heavy fighting in Chiapas, the Mexican people rejected the arguments of their government and demanded peace in the streets of every major city of the nation. The Mexican legislature passed a "Law of Peace and Dialogue" which recognized the Zapatistas as a legitimate social organization, obligated Mexican armed forces to discontinue offensive actions, and mandated that the government open a peace dialogue with the rebel Indian forces.

Since that time, the Zapatistas have honored the cease fire and searched for non-military solutions to the conflict while steadfastly maintaining their demands for justice, dignity and democracy. The Zapatistas and the Mexican government have signed peace accords only to have that agreement abrogated by the Mexican government. Yet the Zapatistas have continued to honor the cease fire. This despite well documented attacks by government backed forces which have ultimately resulted in more than 30,000 displaced Zapatistas who have been forced into hiding and refugee camps.

The Zapatistas have undertaken a number of innovative political initiatives such as the 1999 independent plebiscite in which 2500 Zapatista men and 2500 Zapatista women, one man and one woman traveling together, visited every county in Mexico to argue for their demands. The Mexican people voted overwhelming in favor of the Zapatistas. And just as a new president took office in 2001, the Zapatistas announced their intention to send twenty-three of their commanders and the silver tongued sub commander Marcos to the Mexican capital. After a mobilization of millions of Mexican citizens, the Zapatistas overcame enormous political opposition by all sides of the Mexican political establishment and the tiny indigenous woman known as Commander Ester eloquently argued the Zapatista case before the Mexican congress. Despite being the most popular piece of legislation in Mexican history, a coalition of left, center, and right establishment parties in congress rejected implementation of the constitutional and legal reforms needed to implement the peace agreement previously signed by the Zapatista and the central government. Despite the rejection of the critical "Peace Accords of San Andres" by the Mexican congress and, eventually, by the Supreme Court, the Zapatistas have continued to open schools and medical facilities throughout Chiapas. Their creative organizing and their nationalistic, but enlightened social policies have vastly expanded the Zapatista bases of support inside and outside of Chiapas.

"Mexicans, at the cry of battle prepare your swords and bridle," proudly sang the assembled indigenous community members as the

tinest students attending the Zapatista school struggled to carry a large Mexican flag to the front of their classroom. The singing of the somewhat militarist Mexican national anthem opens every public Zapatista gathering. I am always surprised that despite continued repression and outright racism heaped upon the Mayans by the national government, an emotional and raw patriotism is openly placed on display in every Zapatista gathering.

The national anthem continued and the Zapatista flag remained in the background, always lower than the national banner, as adults and children sang what always appears to be the most popular stanza; "Should a foreign enemy dare to profane your land with his sole, Think, beloved fatherland, that heaven gave you a soldier in each son." Despite military encirclements, corruption, and structural adjustment carried out by the Mexican government at the behest of the World Bank, the Zapatistas insist on remaining a proud part of the Mexican nation. They continue in tradition of their hero and namesake General Emiliano Zapata who, during the Mexican revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, placed demands upon the central government without acting to take state power by force or ballot. (Many Mexican political commentators have suggested that the wildly popular Zapatista spokesperson Sub commander Marcos would easily win presidential elections if the Zapatista chose to run him for office. However the Zapatista's steadfastly maintain that their focus on justice, dignity, and democracy rather than on state power.)

On August 9, 2003, in a further demonstration of the Zapatista intent to base their governing authority in indigenous civil society, Zapatista civilian governments described as "Boards of Good Government" (Juntas de Buen Gobierno) were initiated in each of five caracoles. At the same time, the Zapatista military forces announced a pullback to allow the autonomous, indigenous civilian Boards of Good Government to form their own civilian police forces and carry out all the functions of a normal civilian government.

Discovery of transgenic contaminations in southern Mexico

"For 500 years our Mayan peoples have endured tremendous suffering," explained the young teacher or education promoter as the Zapatistas call those responsible for instructing both children and adults. "Actually there was even much suffering before the Europeans arrived, but we survived that suffering. Now we have survived the 500 years since the rulers of our ancestors were defeated by Hernan Cortez and these new rulers from Europe tried to eliminate our language, our religion, and our culture."

The moment was New Year's 2002, seven years after the Zapatistas took up arms and only months after the academic journal Nature published news of transgenic contamination in indigenous corn in the neighboring Mexican state of Oaxaca. Perhaps it was inevitable that every indigenous discussion of the discovery of GMO contaminations in the indigenous corns of southern Mexico seemed to include a reflection on Europe's invasion of Mexico in the early

1500's. During these early discussions which eventually resulted in the birth of Mother Seeds in Resistance from the Lands of Chiapas I began to sense a little of the horror and outrage these idealistic young Tzotzil educators felt about the introduction of foreign genes into Mexican corn. In the three years since those discussions, I understand more clearly that this new invasion by transgenic corn is a total abomination; a fundamental physical and spiritual violation of the Mayan culture and of the Mayan peoples themselves.

"We must all understand that only our natural corn has allowed us to survive, to resist, to withstand our sufferings," continued the young education promoter. "That is why it is appropriate for the name of this project to be Sme' Tzu'nubil Stzi'kel Vocol." Another promoter picked up the train of thought and eagerly continued, "Of course, yes, 'sme' tzu'nubil' means "mother seeds" and we need that idea because our creation stories tell us we are made of corn and we renew our bodies with corn every day. For us 'stzi'kel vocol' means 'resistance'. These two words translate as 'withstanding suffering' and that is exactly what our corn allows us to do. Our insurrection could not continue without our corn."

Imagine a Latin American armed uprising where "resistance" is defined as "withstanding suffering"! After years of hearing Zapatista men and women use the Spanish word "resistencia" to describe their social, cultural, economic, and political program, I suddenly understood that the two Tzotzil words regularly translated as "resistencia" had nothing to do with my image of "resistance". Obviously this new Tzotzil translation made perfect sense. Zapatista processes have always emphasized patience, understanding, and tolerance. An often repeated central tenet and vision for this indigenous movement is "For a world where all the worlds fit". But I was astounded to suddenly understand that the resistance these 21st century rebels envisioned utilizing to win justice, dignity, and democracy for their communities was based on "stzi'kel vocol" which literally means "withstanding suffering"!

Despite my personal linguistic reflection, by now everyone in the small Zapatista-run restaurant in the highlands of Chiapas was totally focused on the Spanish language discussion about transgenic contaminations. Numerous side discussions explored a variety of topics in animated Tzotzil and even the ubiquitous television program was turned down to encourage participation. Only a few hard core TV junkies were struggling to track movie and discussion at the same time.

"To be a Zapatista is to be in resistance, we Zapatistas are prepared to withstand whatever suffering the bad government brings in order that there can be dignity, democracy, and justice in the world and for everyone. But now we must understand that the bad governments are attacking our corn; the GMO's are causing our corn great suffering. Now it is our turn to help our corn resist, because our corn has always sustained our resistance. We must help our corn

withstand this new suffering of transgenic contaminations."

Countless conversations such as this one finally resulted in the Zapatista decision to place corn seed in long term storage. "We know that the bad governments and the multinational corporations have stolen the people's corn seed and keep them frozen to be used to make money for the rich people. Our seed bank will be different," declared the Zapatista education official. "I don't even like the term "bank" because we will protect our seeds without thinking that it will make us rich. We will save the corn because the corn is us and we are the corn."

Zapatistas Travel to the Capital to Defend Corn

Since the Zapatista commanders had traveled to Mexico City and spoken before congress in 2001, the movement had entered a deep silence and no Zapatista representative had left Chiapas or made any public statement. However, in a little noticed but significant political act, several of the same education promoters who spoke eloquently in the New Year's discussion quoted above were sent to Mexico City to participate in a public colloquium entitled "The National Forum in Defense of Mexican Corn". As of the time of this writing (December 2004), no other indigenous Zapatista has spoken outside of Chiapas. Therefore because of the importance of this statement I am including the entire text of the Zapatista written declarations before that conference which were translated into English by Irlandesa:

"Brothers and sisters, you who have come from different places and who are of different political affiliations. We want to thank you for giving us the opportunity to participate along with you in this national forum in defense of corn. There are four of us here, and we are from the highlands of Chiapas.

"We are people who are made of corn and earth, we are Tsotsil indigenous. Today they call us Tsotsiles, because our true name was transformed on the tip of the invaders' tongue. We have been indigenous ever since our mother earth gave birth to us, and we shall continue to be so until that same mother earth engulfs us. We came to represent an Autonomous Tsotsil School, located in Oventik, Aguascalientes II, in the municipality of San Andrés Sacamch'en de los Pobres in the Los Altos region of Chiapas.

"It is a school that was born out of our indigenous and non-indigenous struggle, in which we sowed our struggle for an alternative education which emancipates humanity, because a people who do not know their history, their culture, are a dead people. It is a school that has no place for making distinctions about people, that is, men or women, large or small, white or dark, old man or old woman, we value everyone, and we are all valuable.

"The school belongs to you, to you who are here today, to Mexico, to the world, to those who speak badly about it today, to those who have looked down upon it. We are fighting for a different education, where we are seeking the common good, where each activist's perspective will not have to be isolated. We are fighting to know

what we were yesterday, what we are today and what we shall be tomorrow.

"We are fighting to know history, to rescue our culture. Because we are quite aware that a people who know their history shall never be condemned to repeat it, and they shall never be defeated.

"We have found out that the agro-chemical companies have patented our natural corn so that we will then have to buy trans-genetic corn. We know the serious consequences of this type of corn they are creating, which affects our culture. For us, the indigenous, corn is sacred. If these agro-chemical companies are trying to get rid of our corn, it is like wanting to get rid of part of our culture which we inherited from our Mayan ancestors. We know that corn is our primary and daily food, it is the base of our culture. We know that our first fathers and mothers, Tepeu and Gukumatz, created us from corn, and that is why we call ourselves men and women of corn.

"That is why our grandfathers and grandmothers did not plant corn in just any way. When they planted their fields they prayed three days before Mok in our Mayan calendar, because the day Mok begins is when our indigenous grandparents surrendered their brabajos, their hearts, asking protection from our god creator so that their work would be successful. During the days of prayer they ate only three tortillas the size of a coin at three in the afternoon, and they took pozol (hominy) and dough so that the plants would not anger the earth, because our grandparents believed that the land, the trees, were beings who had souls. We are worried that our corn will be done away with completely. That is why we want to create a seed bank in our school in order to conserve our corn, and then encourage every community to establish seed banks. A project defending our natural corn is being carried out in our school.

"The name of this project is "Mother Seeds in Resistance from of our Chiapaneco Land". That is why we are participating in this national forum against trans-genetic corn, so that together, and with all the people of Mexico, we will be able to save that part of our culture which they want to steal from us."

On the following afternoon in January of 2003 the young Zapatistas again requested permission to address the conference. To the date of this writing (December 2004), these words are the last public statement made by a Zapatista outside of Chiapas.

"First of all, a very good afternoon to everyone who is here. I am an indigenous campesino from the state of Chiapas, which is one of the richest states in the Mexican Republic because of its variety of natural wealth. It is also one of the states with the highest degree of marginalization, of educational backwardness and of poverty, with more than 2,000,000 inhabitants.

"We are here [in Mexico City], but this is not the first time, because we Mayas have come here since the Anahuak empire. We have returned once again because we know that they will not listen to us from Chiapas. Today we are bringing the voices of our peoples in resistance.

“That voice of the peoples of 500 years of resistance. That voice of those who are erased from memory. We, the survivors of death without bullets, are here in this national forum against trans-genetic seeds and in defense of native corn, which is so important.

“I want to call on the gentlemen of power, primarily on the Chamber of Senators, the Chamber of Deputies and the Executive Branch. Specifically, I do not believe in just words, although it is good if they are talking to us about constitutional rights against trans-genetics. I want them to understand quite clearly: for us, the indigenous, corn is very sacred in our vision of the cosmos, and it is part of our culture.

“But now the entire world knows that Mexican indigenous rights and culture have not been ratified in the Congress of the Union. What they ratified is the freedom of national and transnational businesses, primarily the US, benefiting the Plan Puebla Panama, which is taking a first step by introducing trans-genetic seeds, so that they can then carry out monoculture. This Plan Puebla Panama is only for the benefit of the 1,000,000 middle class inhabitants, and not for the 64 million lower class people in our country.

“And, in order to prevent all this, we need the resistance of Mexicans, like we are giving birth to in Chiapas, and the unity of, or links between, non-governmental organizations, and the understanding that no one is liberated by themselves and that no one can liberate anyone else.”

Zapatistas Want to be Farmers

An autonomous, indigenous official once related an instructive story to me about one of their most respected and loved Zapatista leaders, Commandante David. The setting for the tale is the peace negotiation table at San Andres during a period when the Zapatistas were unable to get the government negotiators to understand their demands. As my Tzotzil friend told the story, a frustrated Commandante David once halted the peace negotiations with the following intervention, “Let me try to explain our demands to all of you important men from the city in another way that perhaps you can understand. I am a farmer. My father was a farmer. Everyone one of the Zapatista representatives you see sitting here at this peace table is a farmer and all of our ancestors have always been farmers. To understand what we want is really quite simple. Please go back to the capital city and tell the president that what the Zapatistas want is to be farmers.” My Tzotzil friend believes the story to be accurate, but I have been unable to have find an independent source to confirm or deny his tale. However, if the story is not true, it should be.

Safe Houses for Chiapas Corn

Early 2002 when the decision was made to place a diverse collection of corn seed in long term freezer storage was a time when the Zapatistas had many other pressing priorities. However Ignacio Chapela's report of transgenic contaminations in the corn of nearby Oaxaca was received with enormous alarm as that fact signaled that

the very ability of the Maya people of Chiapas to continue to be farmers was threatened.

"We have to protect these little seeds because they are under attack just like our communities," softly explained one young, education promoter during a short break in training on long term seed preservation techniques. "My grandfather was killed because he defended the traditions of our community and he believed in justice and democracy. Now, even if I am an indigenous woman, I have to defend our corn so that our traditions can continue." When we returned to the second story classroom large sheets of butcher paper covered the walls. In an analogy drawn from the clandestine history of the Zapatista movement, one sheet of paper boldly described in both Spanish and Tzotzil two types of "safe houses" for Mother Corn. Beside these words were two drawings. One depicted a safe house for the seed itself; the other drawing showed many "safe houses" protecting the indigenous knowledge that provides both the seed and the Maya people with their eternal and inter connected cycle of life. "You see that the seed that cannot survive without its' people, and we cannot survive without our corn," whispered the promoter whose grandfather had been martyred.

To begin the project which would put seed into long term storage, students who attended the Zapatista boarding school at Oventic collected highly viable, quality seed from many communities. With the help and encouragement of education promoters, students' seeds were temporarily stored in locally produced ceramic pots purchased at the nearby Sunday market in San Andres Sacamch'en de los Pobres. Seeds were mixed with ash and lime to combat the ubiquitous cloud forest humidity and a handful of eucalyptus leaves were added to each pot to ward off insects. Finally each orange brown pot was sealed with a cloth strip tied carefully around the opening.

Of course all of the equipment for this popular seed bank could not be locally produced and the next week saw the delivery of the freezer purchased by Dr Taylor for this project. "What sort of a camp is this?" demanded the appliance deliveryman who had driven three hours into the mountains to deliver the freezer purchased in the state capital of Tuxtla Gutierrez. You could literally see the mestizo drivers' jaw drop open as he realized that the sprawling hillside complex nestled beside a tiny Maya village was a major Zapatista center. He was incredulous to see the facility included a number of large new school buildings, a large wooden auditorium covered with striking murals, an Olympic sized basketball court facing a massive plaza, metal and woodworking workshops, a beautiful church, and rough wooden dormitories housing dozens of Mexican and foreign non-indigenous visitors in plain sight for all to see. The delivery man's questions continued as the freezer was connected to the electrical service newly installed for this project and a silent and dark Virgin of Guadalupe, complete with Zapatista mask, took her place on the wooden wall above the humming new white machine. "Where do all these people come from and what are they

doing here?" he asked. The indigenous community leader's only comment was to state that the hospital was taking care of patients, the school had students, and some of the people were visiting to help with projects needed by the community. I still wonder how that young man's story of his visit to Zapatista territory has evolved over the years since his return to the capital city.

"Before the seed can sleep for many years in the freezer," explained the visiting scientist, "our laboratory must verify that the moisture content of the seed is below 6 percent; otherwise when the water inside the corn seed freezes it will expand and burst the cell membranes killing the seed."

The education promoters set up their own production line in one of the new two story classrooms as the day dawned and light streamed into the new classroom still waiting for chalkboards and electricity. One team sifted the seed out of the lime where they were stored temporarily to keep them dry and safe from insects. Today, the red bandana masks that usually protect their own individual identities while proclaiming their identities as Zapatistas had the more practical purpose of filtering out lime dust.

Inside, teams of indigenous youth shuttled pots full of corn out to the sifters. Another team wrote registration numbers and collection data on the foil and plastic bags and labels and entered each collection into a central registry. The seed teams poured the corn seed into the marked bags and took them to the drying team. There the education promoters carefully placed open bags on pans of a gypsum-drying agent inside a waterproof environment created by two large plastic bags tied with bright colored thread. Several days later found the entire group of education promoters bashing dozens of multicolored corn seeds that balanced precariously on rocks placed on the classroom floor.

"If the seed mashes when we hit it with the hammer that proves the water content is above the six percent we need," explained one teacher who happily waved a large steel hammer in one hand while balancing a baby on her hip with the other. "If the seed shatters when I hit it, then the seed is dry enough to be sealed in these foil bags and placed in the freezer. There it will be safe for many years from insects as well as infections by genetically modified pollen."

Later in the day students switched to one hundred percent Tzotzil as they explored the importance of corn in their communities. "I'll write it for everyone," exclaimed one enthusiastic education promoter leaping forward. Everyone shouted out the indigenous words and spoke excitedly, all laughing and debating and talking at the same time over the finer points of using corn and the many variations among their far-flung communities. "You really are men and women of corn," joked a visiting teacher trainer as the list of Tzotzil nouns grew longer and longer.

The hypnotic prayers of the kneeling school board members and education promoters were sung softly in Tzotzil and seemed to float lightly above the burning candles inside the school library. "We're

praying for survival of the mother seeds of corn and the success of our students who have just graduated," explained the president of the school board. "With our wives and the new promoters we ask the creator to allow this school to continue and to give us the strength to continue our resistance." Eventually it seemed as if the prays escaped through the metal door, smiling as they gently caressing the fog-shrouded mural of school children newly painted on the front of the massive concrete library by Zapatista students and passed into the heavens.

Afterwards, as the students walked the muddy pathways returning to their homes at the end of the semester, a tiny red spot glowed brightly outside the freezer's building signaling to anyone who cared to look that the high tech freezing machine was functioning to protect the now frozen seed from GMO assault. And as the moonlight streamed brightly above, light from the large candles still burning in the school's library seemed to accept and welcome the weaker illumination from the safely sleeping seeds. Let us all pray that these people and their corn can survive this brave new world; and let each of us who has ever eaten corn accept the heartfelt Zapatista invitation to forge new connections to the birthplace of this crop. From the first days of Mother Seeds in Resistance many limitations of long term storage program were acknowledged and discussed. Specifically, participants understood that the frozen seeds represent only a small sample of the biodiversity present in Chiapas Corn and that the freezer offers a somewhat false sense of purity since the corn seed which rests there has been open pollinated. Obviously it is impossible for the freezer to preserve the constantly evolving Mayan cultures which nurture and rely on this seed. Perhaps most importantly, the "safe house" for corn gave the Zapatistas a sense of being dragged closer to the commoditization of seed with all of the administrative and technical complexities of grow outs, germination, tests, and record keeping.

Chiapas Corn Goes on the Road

"We want you to take our seeds to others far away who want to give it a safe new home," declared a spokesperson for the Good Government Board in the highlands of Chiapas as the entire board nodded their heads in agreement. "This will be another way for people to know the Zapatistas and it might help our corn to escape the dangers of transgenics which are coming into Chiapas because of the bad governments and the big corporations."

By inviting families and farmers throughout Mexico and around the world to plant corn from Chiapas, Mother Seeds in Resistance began to overcome some of the weaknesses associated with an exclusive focus on long term freezer storage of seed. Solidarity growing of GE free corn from Chiapas, Mexico allows people worldwide to become active participants in the effort to save this vital biological resource.

In addition, by freely sharing their seed with other small farmers and gardeners who agree not to claim ownership the autonomous communities of Chiapas remind us all that life cannot be owned or

patented by anyone. Hopefully a few farmers will have the technical ability to maintain genetically pure seed lines, but most solidarity growers will simply enjoy growing these beautiful corn seed and then invite friends and neighbors to a Zapatista corn feast.

"No, we are not afraid that our corn or other seed is about to travel to distant lands," quietly murmured the female chairperson for the Good Government Board far in the north of Chiapas. "Many of our people have traveled great distance and perhaps this corn will find new homes and make us new friends. Perhaps in this way it can escape the dangers of transgenic contamination here in Chiapas. In any case we have always shared our seed with those who need it and we hope that others will eat and enjoy this good food."

"GMO-FREE MAYAN CORN SEED AVAILABLE FOR SANCTUARY PLANTING," boldly proclaimed the headline on the promotional flyer posted at many health food stores and local seed swaps. "Sow the seeds of resistance and join the growing movement against transgenic contamination of Mayan corn," continued the brightly colored flyer. "You can be a part of preserving a genetic heritage that has evolved over thousands of years by planting these powerful seeds in your community, farm, home, school, or family garden. Have a sanctuary corn party when you harvest and invite all of your friends and family to eat great corn while celebrating the Zapatista movement!" The flyer concluded by explaining, "Currently six types of Mayan corn are available including Highlands Purple, Highlands Yellow, Highlands White, Palenque Black, Palenque White, and Palenque Yellow. All of these seeds have been donated by Zapatista small farmers who hope that people of conscience around the world will provide respectful sanctuary for this living part of their cultural heritage."

On a windswept hill overlooking Point Reyes National Park several hours north of San Francisco, California the gently swaying group of friends and neighbors faced the huge corn plants planted and nourished at the "Oceansong Farm and Nature Center". It was just after sunset that one member of the group sang a Cherokee corn prayer from each of the four directions as everyone marveled at the beauty and strength of those plants living so far from home.

"Growing this wonderful corn has been a marvelous experience," explained Mr. Benjamin Fahrer who farmings at Oceanson without chemicals or machinery. "Next year we will plant more Zapatista corn so that it can be safe." During this first year of solidarity grow outs Zapatista corn has sprouted from Canada to Spain and from the Andres to Patagonia. Indigenous Pueblo farmers from New Mexico have joined with seed savers in Georgia, activists in Portland, picaderos in the southern cone, and schoolchildren in San Diego to give these corns safe new homes. The 2005 growing season should see many more individuals and communities across the globe experimenting with Zapatista seed.

Zapatista Adventures in Genetic Testing - Part II

Genetic testing of corn samples by Zapatistas with the Mother

Seeds in Resistance is not new. Such testing was necessary when creating the "safe houses" of long term freezer preservation of seed and when seeking "safe houses" in farms and gardens far from Chiapas. Each sample of corn stored in the freezer needed to be tested for purity as did the seed intended for distant grow out by friends worldwide. Throughout the early history of Mother Seeds, the testing of saved samples of corn seed represented a defensive act designed to assure adequate reserves of genetic diversity in the face of encroaching GE contaminations.

As the testing program for GE contamination briefly described at the beginning of this chapter began, I felt a new Zapatista adventure being born. At that time the Zapatistas were finally mounting an offensive, rather than defensive effort against the GMO contaminations. Individual Mayan farmers now wanted to know if their seed was contaminated and were prepared to use genetic testing to plan strategies of resistance. As the Mother Seeds in Resistance from the Lands of Chiapas project matured, Zapatista representatives moved beyond the horror and outrage they first felt in regards to Chapela and Quist's 2001 revelations in Nature about GE contaminations in Oaxaca. This new type of testing for GE contaminations meant that GE contaminations were no longer unknown or invisible.

"We need to know about the resistance to these transgenics which is happening in other lands," insisted a member of the Reception Committee in the highlands of Chiapas during a planning meeting for Summer 2004 Zapatista corn conference. "More Zapatistas will learn the testing methods we have just observed, but please also bring people who can tell how they are responding to this new attack by the bad governments. What about Oceania and Africa? Is there resistance in Asia? Tell people we want to hear their word and will welcome them when they come here to our mountains."

Several scientists and activists did respond to this heartfelt Zapatista invitation making the summer of 2004 something of a watershed for Mother Seeds in Resistance. For the first time in Zapatista territory, the worldwide nature of the GE threat was openly discussed. Speeches, videos, documents, and even songs transported participants around the globe, quickly touching down in Oaxaca, Argentina, Africa, India, New Zealand, indigenous nations within the US, and always back to the mountains of the Mexican southeast.

"Before I begin my presentation, I want to bring you greetings from the peoples of Zimbabwe," began political scientist and southern African expert Carol Thompson. "Your ancestors created this important food which is now the staple diet of the people of Zimbabwe. You will always be honored for this marvelous gift."

The young and old indigenous promoters of agro-ecology listened with rapt attention as Dr. Thompson detailed stories of southern African resistance to GE corn. During recent drought induced famines in Zimbabwe and other southern African nations, non-governmental organizations analyzed that the U.S. might attempt to introduce GE

corn as food aid. Eventually large shipments of GE corn did arrive in African ports and these organizations demanded that the corn be milled before distribution. Grinding the seeds would insure the shipments were only used as food and could not be planted and thus would not contaminate indigenous corns.

"The United States responded that grinding the corn was 'too expensive'," exclaimed a clearly indignant Dr. Thompson. "Too expensive was George Bush's reply to the African's demand for grinding of the GE corn. Despite the fact that my government had millions of dollars to rain bombs upon the peoples of Afghanistan and Iraq, \$30 a ton was too much to ask when it came to grinding corn shipped as food aid to southern Africa."

Dr. Thompson proceeded to explain to the assembled indigenous community leaders that the African governments themselves eventually responded to the popular opposition to transgenic corn seed and paid, out of their tiny national budgets, to have the corn grind before it was distributed. Later in the afternoon Zapatista agro-ecology promoters commented excitedly to each other in Tzotzil as images of community women in Zimbabwe harvesting and storing corn filled the makeshift screen in the massive tin roofed auditorium of Oventic.

The indigenous promoters continued and expanded their Tzotzil discussions during detailed explanations of field testing which were translated from Spanish by respected members of the Reception Committee. For this training conference, Mayan families throughout the highlands donated corn leaves from their local fields or milpa. This new round of testing took place because Zapatistas decided they needed to know location of GE contaminations. In a sense, Zapatistas needed to be able to "see" the contaminations in order to eventually attack and eliminate GMO's in Chiapas.

Resisting the Transgenic Invasion

"Certainly we have always carefully studied the location of each military base that the bad governments sent to invade our lands." The analogy of transgenic contamination to military invasion was slowly translated into each of the languages spoken by the groups of indigenous agro-ecology promoters exploring procedures for the field testing of corn. "Now the transgenic contamination of our corn really is another new and dangerous invasion coming into our communities. These little test kits give us a way to identify the location and strength of the bases and centers of this new invasion from the north."

The dream in those misty mountains and steamy rainforest of the Mexican southeast is to first identify the distribution of GE contaminations throughout Chiapas. After identifying the location of GE contaminations, political organizing would be intensified to educate everyone in the community, regardless of political affiliation, not to introduce additional GMO seed. "We Zapatistas have always believed that the word, our honest and true voice of our Zapatista heart, is more powerful than any weapon," commented the translator sent from the reception committee.

Eventually the communities would act together to physically challenge and eliminate GE contaminations one at a time. Every family in a selected zone of contamination would be organized to use genetically pure seed donated from non-contaminated communities at planting time. Any volunteer plants left from seed accidentally dropped on the ground during the previous harvest would be destroyed and extensive testing would be undertaken before any new plants would be allowed to release their pollen into the milpa or corn field. In this manner, it is hoped that the contaminated seed would be eliminated and the field would once again produce only the genetically pure, indigenous corn.

Although there have been a few instances where communities in Europe have destroyed GE test fields, no one seems to know if this Zapatista dream is possible; if it is scientifically possible to reverse extensive contaminations by GMO crops. However using a combination of western science and indigenous insight, the Zapatistas of Chiapas have already accomplished many miracles. Perhaps their extraordinarily organizing ability and the fierce loyalty of their ever growing social base will make Chiapas the first place on earth to eliminate a full blown GE contamination. Perhaps people from other lands will join this battle for nature and purity in the very birthplace of corn.

Of course this long range plan for making Chiapas GMO free only makes sense in the context of world wide scale opposition to GE seed. During the summer of 2004 the Zapatistas received much evidence that such an international movement against transgenic crops does exist and may be growing. Indigenous men and women were repeatedly astounded to learn how far Mike, an anti-GMO activist and Greenpeace fundraiser from New Zealand, had traveled just to meet the Zapatistas. Dramatically glancing at his watch and flashing his signature grin Mike began every presentation by saying in full cockney accent, "Good afternoon, I come from the other side of the world and right now in my home it is 8am . . . 8am tomorrow morning!"

"In our fight against the GMO's trying to enter New Zealand we are using a card played by our mothers and fathers when they fought to stop the gringos from putting nuclear bombs in our lands during their dirty war in Vietnam. When our National Government could not find the courage to declare their opposition to nuclear proliferation, we returned to our communities. First, we asked individual families to declare their homes to be nuclear free zones; then we went to sports facilities and churches asking them to make public declarations as nuclear free zones." Zapatista men and women who listened to this passionate activist were already nodding their head in agreement. "When our communities spoke in unison of our opposition, our national government found its' voice and outlawed nuclear weapons and nuclear power. In this way, we stopped the gringos from bringing their nuclear aircraft carriers to our ports as they traveled to bomb the people of Vietnam."

"Now we are doing the same thing with GMO's," were Mike's closing

words to Zapatista promoters, municipal leaders, and even the Good Government Board. "We would welcome the strong voice of the Zapatistas in this struggle. Will you join with us in raising your voice against this world wide proliferation of GMO contamination?" Every time the participating Zapatistas agreed that they wanted to declare their homes and communities to be GMO free. And in the end, even Good Government Board of the highlands of Chiapas chose to respond directly to Mike's repeated questioning of their position on the struggle against GMO's.

Toward a GE Free Chiapas and a GE Free World

The slender Tzotzil Good Government representative slowly tapped the side of his head with his finger, clearly smiling behind the signature red bandana. Finally he exclaimed, "Yes, yes, I have it right here. Just let me remember for a moment to be sure that I get it exactly right." After a brief pause, almost certainly searching for the Spanish words capable of summarizing the memorized Tzotzil conversation, he continued in a somewhat more serious tone. "Everyone one should know that we Zapatistas are opposed to transgenics. We have participated in public forums to defend Mexican corn so our position should be clear to all. Zapatistas will always be with those who are resisting the bad governments and big corporations. In Chiapas we have instructed all of our bases of support to plant only seed which is known to them; no Zapatista will accept or plant seed from the outside."

Smiling as he gained confidence in Spanish, the Zapatista spokesperson concluded, "Everyone who is fighting transgenics should know that we Zapatistas are with them. Please tell them we are with them. Please tell them they are welcome to visit us. We in the autonomous, indigenous communities of Chiapas are resisting transgenics. Zapatistas want Chiapas to be free of transgenics and we will continue struggling until we achieve that goal."

In the silence that followed this profound and unexpected public declaration, my mind flashed to the men and women from cultures and movements around the globe who should know that the Zapatistas stand with them in resisting GE contaminations. How could we help transmit this message around the globe? Would others recognize the significance of an indigenous statement like this, directly from the birthplace of corn? Would the myriad peoples fighting GMO's look beyond the ski masks and occasional militaristic nods toward Latin American revolutionary culture to offer desperately needed support for the Zapatistas? Perhaps I can only ask that you find a way to pass along to your friends and family what you have learned and what you have felt while reading all the way to the end of this long chapter. And I sincerely thank you for this in advance.

Perhaps someday I will meet you in the misty mountains or steamy rain forests of the Mexican southeast. I hope so. In any case I will end in the tradition of Zapatista speakers by telling you that these are my words. I hope that you have understood them and not been offended. These are all of my words. Thank you again.

