

CELEBRATING THE CARACOLES: STEP BY STEP, THE ZAPATISTAS ADVANCE ON THE HORIZON

John Ross

OVENTIC CHIAPAS (Aug. 27th) - On the first birthday of the “Caracol,” whose Mayan name means, “The Central Heart of the Zapatistas Before The World,” Tzotzil Indian musicians in beribboned ceremonial *sombreros* strummed harps and guitars in front of the small wooden house with a vivid mural glowing on its façade depicting a giant ear of corn on which all the kernels were ski-masked Zapatistas.

Some four hundred such murals now illuminate the Zapatista geography in the highlands and jungle of southeastern Chiapas state where 1100 base communities grouped into twenty-nine autonomous municipalities and five “*Caracoles*” have taken firm root.

“*Caracoles*” are literally “snails” or conch shells, traditionally utilized by Mexico’s indigenous peoples to summon the community together, precisely the function of these political/cultural centers. But “*caracol*” also means spiral and the rebels’ quixotic spokesperson Subcomandante Marcos, who rebaptized these centers (previously known as “Aguascalientes”) last year, conceives of them as spirals that open to the outside world and through which the outside world can know the Zapatistas.

The Caracoles also serve a more prosaic purpose. One year ago, on August 8th 2003, the birthday of Zapatista namesake and revolutionary martyr Emiliano Zapata, “Juntas de Buen Gobierno” (JBGs or “Good Government Committees”), consisting of two representatives from each of the autonomous municipalities in the region, were installed at the five caracoles. The establishment of the JBGs initiated a dramatic restructuring of civil Zapatismo as a building block to regional as well as

municipal autonomy.

A trio of ski-masked representatives of the fourteen-member JBG based in Oventic above San Cristobal in the Tzotzil-speaking highlands and the most public Zapatista outpost, are squeezed together behind a tiny desk inside the Junta house. Above them, a hand-painted portrait of Sub Marcos in which he looks oddly cross-eyed, surveys the visitors. Black and white photographs of significant Zapatista events line the walls, as does an enormous anti-globalization poster. Balloons and glistening tinsel dangle from the roof beams to mark the first anniversary of the Oventic Junta De Buen Gobierno.

The JBGs advertise that they are open for business twenty-four hours a day. "We are always ready to receive the *compas*" confirms *junta* member Moises, "you can come here at any hour." The JBGs were established to coordinate regional autonomy, resolve disputes between autonomous municipalities, and insure an equitable distribution of resource between Zapatista populations such as Oventic, which are adjacent to the road, and those in the outback. Additionally, the JBGs oversee the work of health, education, housing, agricultural, and justice commissions that serve the region. "We are not like the federal government. We rescue the traditions, the culture, the old ways of governing. We serve only at the will of the people (the principle of '*mandar obedeciendo*' or 'governing by obeying the will of the people')," explains Moises.

The JBGs also pass on all proposals from non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to assure that they serve the rebel development agenda, and seek to spread the resource around by assigning a part of the seed money to more threadbare "*autonomias*." In a year-end accounting, Subcomandante Marcos records that the JBGs received delegations from forty-three nations and every state in the Mexican union last year, offering material aid projects.

Today, a delegation from Minnesota has come to ask the JBG's permission for a visit by a dozen Midwestern fair

traders dealing Zapatista coffee in El Norte who want to meet with growers in two coops that fall under Oventic's jurisdiction. Organic coffee sales play an increasingly pivotal role in Zapatista fortunes. In 2003, the Muk Vitz cooperative, which incorporates parts of six autonomous municipalities and twenty-nine Zapatista communities, sold twenty huge containers on the European and U.S. fair trade market and this year, the Y'achil coop will certify nearly a thousand Zapatista farmers as organic producers.

The "aromatic" brings with it the Zapatista message of resistance. Much of the coffee gets distributed through an informal network of U.S., Mexico-, and European-based cafés—Philadelphia's White Dog, the Human Bean Company in Denver, Rincon Zapatista in Mexico City, Caracol Maya in Barcelona are just a few—which also serve as sounding boards for the rebels' perspectives and promote solidarity and material aid. Meanwhile, the return from organic coffee sales is financing Zapatista infrastructure in the highlands and the jungle. Fifty new schools have been built in recent years noted Subcomandante Marcos in a year-end evaluation.

After due consideration, the three members of the Oventic JBG granted the fair traders permission for the visit. "You are welcome here. You may stay as long as you need to and take as many pictures as you like," beamed Moises. The ski-masked trio affirmed its decision by obligingly posing for a visiting photographer in front of the cross-eyed Marcos portrait.

The first year anniversary of the Caracoles was a time for the JBGs to appraise their work. "We are learning here how to govern ourselves, to walk alone without help from the federal government," Moises later explains to a handful of reporters, his soft voice melding with the serenade of the Mayan harps outside. Now even communities with traditional allegiances to the once-ruling PRI party, and the Zapatistas' persecutors through all the long years they held power, have come to the JBGs for help in solving their problems. "The '*mal gobierno*'

(bad government) doesn't listen to them anymore than it listens to us and does not help them to resolve their difficulties. We are happy that we can help," the Tzotzil farmer explains.

In a series of verbal "videos" distributed to the national press, Subcomandante Marcos critiqued the JBGs for being slow to take decisions and for a decided lack of women on their rosters.¹ The JBGs have also been painted as ineffective because the representatives from the autonomous municipalities rotate in and out every few weeks—the "Sup" argues that in establishing the JBGs, the EZLN is also building "a school of government" and asked patience. Marcos also compared the JBG's skeletal budgets to gargantuan stipends doled out to public officials. "The representatives bring their own pozol and tostadas. We make tea from the weeds. Our only expense is for the *combi* (public transport) and sometimes we walk."

The Oventic JBG's work has not been free of difficulty in its first year on the job. Road signs demarcating Oventic as Zapatista territory have been repeatedly shot at. Last April 10th, the annual commemoration of the assassination of the quasi-deity they call Votan-Zapata, when 4000 rebels gathered in a nearby hamlet to protest a water cut-off to outlying Zapatista villages by the Zinacantan municipal government (now governed by the purportedly left-center PRD party), they were beaten and shot by PRD goons—twenty nine were hospitalized, four with gunshot wounds.

The violence in Zinacantan was the most serious outbreak in the highlands since military and police invaded the autonomous municipality of San Juan de la Libertad in June 1998. Only the absence of big caliber firepower averted a massacre such as occurred at Christmas 1997 when forty-six Tzotzil Zapatista supporters were slain at Acteal, just over the mountain from Oventic. As at Acteal, the state government offered an "anthropological" explanation for the Zinacantan attack, attributing it to differing interpretations of traditional "uses and customs," i.e. when Zapatista communities refused to contrib-

ute large sums of money so traditional leaders could buy “*posh*” (sugar cane alcohol) for religious celebrations, their water was cut off and they were brutally assaulted.

Despite the bruises, Moises is optimistic: “we are new and make many mistakes but I am proud of the work that we have done.”

Outside the JBG’s hobbit-like headquarters, the Oventic Caracol was in full *fiesta* mode, celebrating not only the Junta’s first birthday but also the inauguration of a new primary school to accommodate the swelling number of children born during these past ten years of Zapatista resistance. The new primary school abuts the “January 1st Insurgent” middle school, built by U.S. volunteer brigades and the Oventic community, the cornerstone of the Zapatistas’ burgeoning educational system.

With its newly paved main (and only) street lined with food and weaving stalls, and the Oventic general store crammed to the rafters with international well-wishers gobbling up CDs of popular local *Comandante* David warbling revolutionary *corridos* (ballads), the first anniversary party was a showcase for the rebels’ survival skills.

Neighboring villages set up camps on the green hill-sides under brilliant swatches of plastic to ward off the August rains and down on the basketball court, fifty teams with names like “The Anarchy of Chenalho” whizzed up and down the *cancha*, an island of concrete in a sea of mud, and battled for rebounds under backboards decorated with red stars. Like the rebellion itself, the quality of rebel basketball has matured in the past decade with players exhibiting finesse in place of wild shots and even playing a little defense without deliberately fouling an opponent. To keep the players moving, a six-keyboard Zapatista band pumped out *cumbias* from the crowded stage but their performance was rudely cut short by a mysterious power failure. “*Pinche* government!” the *musicos* yelled, rolling out large, acoustic marimbas to sustain the musical momentum.

In sharp contrast to the party atmosphere that reigned over Oventic, a dozen miles down the road the Chamulas, Tzotziles who share this rock-studded terrain with the Zapatistas, were on the warpath. Disgruntled at their mayor for having failed to deliver promised public works, they locked him and his city council inside the San Juan Chamula jail, threatening to set fire to the building and roast the officials alive—one city council member's home was torched. For two days, the ugly mob surrounded the jail and the *posh* flowed like water. It is an election year in Chiapas and the politicians soak the highland villages with *posh* to insure a favorable vote.

The distinction between the “celebrations” is instructive. While Chamula culture is saturated with *posh*, the Zapatistas simply do not drink. Prohibitions against alcohol consumption, writes Hermann Bellinghausen, the most knowledgeable of Zapatista chroniclers, probably averted a bloodbath after the January 1st 1994 uprising.

Without a drop of the *trago* (strong drink), gala celebrations of the first year anniversary of the Caracoles and their Juntas de Buen Gobierno were mounted at all five rebel political/cultural centers in southeastern Chiapas this August. No *comandantes* were present at the events (last year, they were the featured orators), suggesting that civil Zapatismo has a firm hand on the rudder of the rebellion.

One of the most spectral shindigs was thrown at La Culebra (“the Snake”) out on the edges of the Montes Azules biosphere sanctuary, the last remnants of Lacandon jungle wilderness, where the Zapatistas were celebrating completion of the “Compañero Manuel” teacher-training center. Built as quietly as a rumor with Danish seed money by Greek civil society volunteers, the new center is described by Bellinghausen as being in the Hellenic-Tzeltal architectural tradition, and is topped by an enormous “beehive” structure which houses, classrooms, and dormitories.

The Compañero Manuel center has already graduated

over a hundred education *promotores* in that remote region, all of them young people (15 to 25) who grew up with the Zapatista rebellion. “Our education has not just been to teach reading and writing but also so our struggle will be dignified by righteousness and that we may all speak with one heart,” enthused Hortencia, a teen-age education promoter, to the writer Gloria Muñoz.

Globalization from the bottom was the theme in La Culebra with Greeks and Danes, Catalans who run a clinic at the nearby Caracol of Roberto Barrios, and U.S. bike enthusiasts from Ithaca New York who have installed a bicycle repair shop in Francisco Gomez (another *caracol*) partying down with the Tzeltal *campesinos* on the edge of the jungle. Also on hand for what the Greeks termed “a Zapatista Anti-Olympics” were representatives of Indian and popular movements from Argentina and Ecuador, and Zapatista solidarity groups from Italy and all over Mexico. The champion Milan football team, Liber, underwrites JBG expenses.

On the Zapatista map, La Culebra forms one part of the *autonomia* named for the old anarchist Ricardo Flores Magon that has been carved out of the Taniperlas *ejido*. In May 1998, federal troops and Chiapas state police were sent into Taniperlas to dismantle the autonomous municipality, destroying offices, hauling dozens of defenders off to jail, and deporting twelve non-Mexican solidarity workers. In their rampage, the marauders destroyed a bucolic mural, “The Dream of the Perlas River Valleys,” whose creation had been coordinated by Mexico City painter Sergio “El Checo” Valdez—Valdez was imprisoned for almost a year for this seditious act.

In early August, El Checo was back in Chiapas to celebrate the first anniversary of the Caracoles with a more “cubistic” (Bellinghausen) version of the destroyed mural which has now been reproduced by rebel artists on walls all over the world – none perhaps more poetically than on Jack Kerouac alley in San Francisco’s North Beach district.

“Never again a Mexico without us (sic),” shouted President Vicente Fox, stealing a line from the Zapatista Army of National Liberation as he welcomed a few hundred bussed-in Indian artisans to Los Pinos, the Mexican White House this past International Day of the *Indígena* (August 9th). Abandoned by Fox after he pledged to fix Chiapas in “fifteen minutes” and then gave up after trying for about that long a period, and enraged at the Mexican Congress for having mutilated a long-fought-for Indian rights law (the San Andrés Accords) that would have guaranteed limited autonomy, the Zapatistas have taken advantage of the government’s cold shoulder to make the Accords a reality in their own territory. “We don’t need the government’s permission to build our own autonomy,” the *comandantes* insisted last August in announcing the creation of the Caracoles, and their success was on display a full year later.

While darkness reigns in the political realm north and south of rebel territory, the Zapatistas, as their old revolutionary hymn proclaims, keep advancing on the horizon.

Endnotes

1 Subcomandante Marcos. 2004. “Leer un video. Segunda parte: Dos fallas,” en *La Jornada*, 21 de agosto, 2004, p. 9; “Leer un video. Tercera parte: Tres hombros,” *La Jornada*, 22 de agosto, 2004 pp. 8-9; “Leer un video. Cuarta parte: Cuatro falacias,” *La Jornada*, 23 de agosto, 2004, pp. 7-9; “Leer un video. Quinta parte: Cinco decisiones de buen gobierno,” en *La Jornada*, 24 de agosto, 2004, pp. 11-13; “Leer un video. Sexta parte: Seis avances,” en *La Jornada*, 25 de agosto, 2004, pp. 19-17; “Leer un video. Séptima parte: Siete días en territorio zapatista,” en *La Jornada*, 27 de agosto, 2004, pp. 9 y 18.