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Experiences in the Development of a Writing System for Ñuu Savi

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Introduction

Indigenous women are the principle and most influential carriers of culture. This is a role developed over centuries. Women are the base for the cultural evolution of a community. I will focus here on specific areas of life of the Ñuu Chikua'a woman. *Ñuu Chikua'a* means 'pueblo of the red mushroom'. It also means 'pueblo of the old or red grandfather'. The community is called "Jicayán" in Spanish, a name that comes from Nahuatl, meaning 'place of the jícaras'.²

Ñuu Chikua'a is a pueblo, or village, that has maintained its indigenous characteristics, even in the face of so-called development programs set up by *indigenista* institutions according to their own ideas.³ Usually, those programs fail. Jicayán has resisted these attacks. Being one of the most stable Indian communities, most of its authentic cultural values have been preserved.

Women as Preservers of Culture

From the moment a woman enters into marriage, she has specific responsibilities. She maintains a neat house, prepares the food for all who live in the house (fathers-, mothers-, sisters-, and brothers-in-law; nephews and nieces; etc.), hauls water, tends the domestic animals, washes the clothes, brings her husband's food to the field where he is working, and helps her husband with his labors in the field. It is she who stores and maintains the seed for planting and she who collects firewood. She takes care of the children and makes up lullabies as she sings them to sleep. She teaches the children, telling them stories and legends; she guides them as they learn to walk. In short, it is women who educate children and it is women who know about and tend to health.

When the father, for reasons of work, has to go to the lowlands (that is, the flat lands near the ocean) or to the cities, the mother, with the help of her counselors (her mother, her mother-in-law, *curanderas* ('healers'), and other old women of experience) must act as both father and mother. Social obligations are always taken on jointly. Neither the man nor the woman ever accepts such obligations on their own. When the husband is gone, the woman speaks for the house, but obligations are taken on only after the couple has had a chance to confer and to reach agreement.

During fiestas, such as the *viko matoma*, or *mayordomía* (a festival in honor of a saint), or

viko nda'vi (the traditional wedding), if the man is not in the village, the woman fulfills the family's obligation as if he were there. She comes up with a gift to support those neighbors who have the *cargo* of celebrating the fiesta.⁴ She helps out with the chores of cooking. This is a way for people to support one another, and is called "giving one's hand". These festivals create a chain of obligations so that when one's time has come to celebrate a fiesta, they will be supported by others. One is only supported, however, if one has entered into this social network and has completed one's own obligation of supporting others.

If the celebration is caused by grief, however—that is, when someone dies—people come spontaneously to help out, without being invited. They come out of good will and friendship, but new social obligations and entanglements are created nonetheless. In these situations, when the woman is alone, she fulfills the duty without consulting her husband. Sooner or later, this is something that will happen to them, so the woman goes to the funeral celebration representing her husband.

In the village, men and women are equally required to work. They may be day laborers or cowhands, or peons who do cleanup work, or who harvest maize, beans, or sesame. The men work as contracted cowhands, tending to cattle. They corral the calves, milk the cows, deliver the milk and cheese to the houses of the ranch owners, take care of the pasture and watch out for the health of the cattle. And for all this work, they get perhaps 15 new pesos a day, sometimes less.⁵

This income has to cover household expenses, including food, clothing, education, fiestas, etc. So the woman, after finishing her own chores, has to use her spare moments *kono ña isa*, which means 'to use a backstrap loom to weave'. Women weave beautiful, multicolored designs and make *jamanda'a* ('napkins'), *koto chi'in chatu*, known as *cotón* and *calzón* in Spanish. Other women are skilled in the making of ceramics. They make *chio* (*comales* in Spanish), *kisi* (*ollas*), *kii* (*cántaros*), *kuu* (*sahumerios*), and other things.⁶

From all this we see that women are always busy doing things, and that they contribute vitally to the development of the culture. For those around them, women carry the imprint of the diverse ways of living and in this way they preserve the essential characteristics of a pueblo.

Women and Literacy

We can ask, then: Does this woman have the time to sit and write? She may have gone to school for three or four years in a school where they didn't let her speak, much less write, her own language and where she was told constantly that her language was worthless. We must recognize that women are the ones who most resist any change in their language, dress, and, above all, their general style of life. In order not to be marginalized by their co-workers, men are often obliged to accept changes at least in their dress, even though they continue to use their own language. But women prefer to continue wearing authentic clothing.

In general, women have fewer opportunities for schooling outside the home. The women elders of the pueblo say that women must learn to do the household chores and learn the secrets of life, because nobody knows what the future will bring. Women who go to school, they say, no longer want to *agarrar el metate*, that is, make tortillas.⁷ Every day, they say, women lose the traditional knowledge that they will need in the long term. What women learn in school, they say, can't be put into practice at home. According to the women elders, schooling is a type of education that often destroys the family environment because women who have been to school no longer want to speak their own language. In school they are required to wear uniforms, so women become ashamed of, and stop wearing, their traditional dress.

Children of both sexes who go to school want to be different from their parents. The great danger of sending children to school is that school makes children lazy. They learn only in classrooms. No one is concerned any more, as they used to be, that children learn to work, so that when they leave school as adolescents they are useful in everyday chores and in the necessary work of life. Nowadays, even children who have gone through the higher grades have no chance for work elsewhere, nor do they know how to work in the fields because they have not learned how.

These days, most Jicayán women living in the big cities try to associate with people of the same culture. With rare exceptions, when they choose a husband they try to find someone from their own pueblo. They do this for various reasons, but one of the most important, the women say, is so their partners will share the customs the women grew up with. Thus, even though they live outside the pueblo, the women keep their language strong by speaking it with their husbands and their children.

They keep up their culture in other ways, too—for example, by preparing meals using recipes from their village and making special dishes. They teach the children traditional values, like respecting their elders and greeting friends and relatives. They are always there for the fiestas celebrated in their pueblos. In fact, many times it is the children of the village who live *iti nuu kani* ('far away') who pay most of the costs of the local fiestas.

Coming out of secondary school (grades 7C9) or high school, children of the pueblo are forced to leave because there are no jobs. They prefer to go to Mexico City. A few go to the city of Oaxaca, the capital of the state, and a handful go to the port of Acapulco. They find themselves in a new and different environment, surrounded by different ways of life. The customs they learned in the village are threatened but not entirely lost. Sometimes they are combined with other customs.

The people in the cities become wealthy and the people in the village are saddened because, they say, the youth of the pueblo are losing their culture, their way of life, their ancestral customs, and are no longer interested in what their ancestors left for them.

Of course, it is true that the cities offer the opportunity to satisfy many needs, but it is also true that the city is a good place to reflect and to develop our consciousness. Those of us who live outside our villages do so because of the need to find work and to make a living, but our cultural consciousness strengthens daily. We do not want to cause the wise and old people of our pueblos anguish; on the contrary, we do everything we can so that they will know that the culture they have given us will not disappear.

Women, Literacy, and the Preservation of Culture

Thus, some of us are working together to perpetuate one of the strongest parts of our culture, the *tu'un N̄uu Savi*, that is, the Mixtec language. We want to contribute to the development of our community by writing so that our language can continue to be what it has been for many centuries. In fact, written communication was developed in Mixtec even before the coming of the invaders.

I believe that my writings about themes in daily Mixtec life reflect the culture into which I was born and which I learned as a child. I am convinced that further developing the writing, in Mixtec, about daily life in our community, will be seen as something novel and interesting and that it will make others in the community see clearly that our culture is as important as any other in the world.

Writing is a great responsibility. With no written literature in our native languages, all our thoughts and knowledge come from transmissions by parents to children, from grandparents to grandchildren, from pueblo to pueblo. It's as if culture were a fountain of knowledge, experiences, and wisdom. Deciding what to write is an enormous question and a source of reflection for anyone setting out on this path.

One of the biggest concerns for those of us who begin writing in our mother tongue is to make sure that our prose is based on a simple, natural language, like that spoken by the people. We want to write as if we were having a conversation with our neighbors and our friends—that is, the people to whom our messages are directed. In my case, I try to write for the *ñivi ñuu*, that is, for the people of the pueblo. In this way I aspire to make the people interested in what they read so that they are motivated and want to continue reading my texts when they begin. Reading something we don't understand tires us right away.

By the same token, it is vitally important to remember that people want to read about things that interest them, that deal with things they can identify with, or that provide information they can use to improve their understanding of some problem they confront in their community. Giving people this, I believe, ensures that our documents will be received well, and that people in the community will become potential readers.

I said that in writing in our native languages we take on a great responsibility. The message we want to transmit has to get to the reader with the same meaning that it started with. In the case of Mixtec, it is very difficult for people in all communities to understand what we write because we have many dialects. Our language varies from one pueblo to another. Sometimes the differences are small, as with the word for 'water', which is *nduta* in some places and *ndute* or *nducha* in others. In this case, one understands the meaning because the root is conserved in the three variations. But some pueblos have completely different terms for the same thing, like *kuiñi* and *nga'a* for 'tiger'. This makes us understand that our language is very rich and that we must use writing as a way to complement and build our vocabulary.

When, as women, we have the chance to discuss our way of life with people from other pueblos, we see that sometimes even the most basic chores are done in different ways. We come to understand one another when we exchange experiences. We discuss the particular ways of doing things that suit us best. From these discussions we adapt and enrich the way we make tortillas, wash clothes, cook, keep house, take care of children, and maintain health. Sometimes we suggest to one another ways of treating common illnesses.

It's not easy to begin the work of writing. It is done only when one can count on the basics of life (food, shelter, health, education, and so on) and when one wants to look beyond one's own culture at other ways of seeing things. Living in another culture makes one take action at some point. For a woman to seek out the spaces in a day to sit and put her ideas and thoughts on paper takes a whole process. We each have our own ideas and experiences, different ways of doing the chores of daily life. Because of the colonization and the discrimination to which they have been subjected for centuries, the people of the pueblos feel inferior about themselves. Thus, sometimes they don't want to write and tell the world that their culture is as important as any other in the world.

Many of us women have the opportunity to tell the world in written words that the distinctive way of life we have learned from our parents and grandparents, our land, is based on ancestral understandings that contain all the wisdom embodied in that distinctive way of looking at the world. One culture can not be held up to and measured against another. Just knowing the different understandings of peoples, however, can contribute to our respecting and valuing

ourselves, and to our knowing that although we are different, we deserve recognition, for we are all as human as everyone else.

Writing a Book in Mixtec

I thought that one of the themes that people might like to read about in my community would be the customs and activities surrounding the traditional wedding. It's a subject of intrinsic interest to people, but above all, when we take on the obligations of marriage we acquire much of the advice, strategies, and norms of behavior—in short, all the philosophical thinking with which to begin a new life. I'm convinced that this is of interest to everyone.

I began by describing the way in which marriages are celebrated nowadays and comparing it with what the old women said about how they got married. Sitting in front of a machine that ate my words—the computer—after a full day of work I thought that what I had written was enough. My surprise came when I had the document printed out. There were only three pages, and I was sure that I had written everything I knew about the subject. From having lived in a culture, one does not think relevant the subtle details about it. One thinks that everyone will understand the message just as one has lived it. I did not understand that I had to explain the smallest details and to say what the details of daily life meant to me.

I came to understand this because when outsiders read what I'd written they asked a lot of questions. This made me think that there needed to be some clarifications. That is, I needed to describe more precisely the meaning of certain words or regional concepts that are not very common. For example, I needed to say that people consume a lot of *tichinadas*, which are black-shelled clams that grow in the mangrove roots in the salt-water lakes. And so the text grew. It grew so much that the subject of traditional weddings could not fit into the first volume of the ethnography called *Ña kaa iyo yo chi Ñuu Chikua'a*, or *Daily Life in Jicayán* (González Ventura 1992, 1993).

At first, one feels uncertain about writing down everything. One often asks oneself: "And what will X or Y say when they read my work? . . . How should I say this or that? . . . And when should I say it?" It's like being in the middle of a bridge with only two options: cross or go back. That's when one must arm oneself with courage and decide. And that's when pages and pages of material flow. We create confidence in ourselves when we determine to write as we really can—as people speak in the pueblo, without fixing up the prose—and to write with the freedom to say what we want to say about the profound, the sacred, the subtle—everything we want to transmit to future generations.

Once I realized how difficult it is for someone who has never been (and would never be) in my pueblo to understand what I was writing about, I made my writing more descriptive so that there would be no doubt about what I wanted to communicate.

Daily Life in Jicayán kept growing. I thought that breaking it into subthemes would make it easier to read and I divided the book into chapters called The Locale, Fruit Trees, Wild Trees, Costume, Why Our Pueblo is Called Ñuu Chikua'a, The Mixtec Calendar, Our Pueblo is Also Named Jicayán, Toward Pinotepa de Don Luis, and The Crosses of Jini Ñuu. With these subthemes the first volume was completed. Unfortunately, the topic of traditional weddings didn't make it into this first volume, though I think it will be treated at length in Volume Two.

The Impact of Being in Front of the Computer

There are several things one must learn in writing an indigenous language. It is difficult and a little risky, but not impossible. The first thing is just to start writing. To do this, of course, one needs an alphabet. In many cases an alphabet already exists. In some cases, in fact, there are several, with a movement going on to unify them into the single, most practical one. However, even when an alphabet exists for a native language, we still have the freedom to write in the way we think our phonemes are best represented. We can then justify the use of particular graphemes.

Often, the justification comes in the process of developing a unified alphabet that everyone agrees on. This is what happened with Nuu Savi. Agreement on an alphabet came after works by several authors were already written. Then, concern that there not be a proliferation of alphabets pushed people into a series of meetings to work things out. The book by Ubaldo López García (1991) was modified prior to publication so that the orthography would conform to a standard.

This example shows that alphabets do not last forever. For an alphabet to be reinforced and legitimated, it must actually be used by more and more people each day to write. As we all know, alphabets, like life itself, evolve.

It's very difficult to maintain an alphabet that isn't used. The people in the pueblos must be informed that all the original languages of the country can be written and that there exists a symbol to represent every sound in their language. They must know that with these symbols—these letters—it is possible to write so that an alphabet acquires a following that actually uses it. It is no use having a well-thought-out alphabet if it is used only by an elite.

The other problem is to learn to use the computer. This is not easy if one has never used an ordinary typewriter. Effort is required to learn advanced skills that let us print reading materials efficiently and professionally. Without the computer, the printing of books involved costs that we had no possibility of meeting.

The *Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, Asociación Civil* (CELIAC), as part of its program, is supporting workshops in the reading and writing of indigenous languages. In these courses, native authors learn to use a word processor so that they can decide for themselves the format of their work. In this way, the richness and diversity of ideas, right from their initial conceptualization by thinking human beings, are turned into a physical reality. My experience in teaching these courses is that all people want is the opportunity to participate. All of us have a stake in bringing to flower the words of our sages, the thoughts of the original children of these lands.

The bilingual teachers of the primary school in Zacatepéc, Putla worked together to demonstrate that indigenous literature gushes like a fountain when people are motivated. During a week of working with the people in their pueblo, they produced a variety of written works, including stories, legends, anecdotes, and ordinary, open conversation.

The works that come out of this experience are different from conventional anthropological writings because they represent indigenous culture and thought more faithfully. The value of these works is made richer and more reliable by the indisputable authenticity of their data and because the often distorted and clouded lens through which outside observers view our cultures is avoided.

For native societies, the dividends from this experience are many, above all because the projects are understood to have been developed from within, by the people themselves.

How People Received the First Written Work in Their Language

When my book was published entirely in Ñuu Savi, I decided, along with the members of CELIAC, that there was no more fitting place to present the work to the public than in its own cradle, that is, in my pueblo. The response of the local authorities and of the pueblo in general was to receive the work with rejoicing. The event was celebrated with native dances, including *tejorones*, *mascaritas*, *tigre*, *diablos*, and *toro*, among others, and a variety of traditional music with an orchestra to accompany the dancers.⁸

Seeing the book was an emotional experience for people. Just seeing the title page brought forth a whole series of commentaries from adults and old people. They immediately recognized as their own the reproduction in the book of the *Soo Ndu'u Ñuu Chikua'a*, the territory of Jicayán illustrated on cloth.⁹ Others began to read paragraphs in which they found the reality of the message.

At this reunion, the experience of writing in Mixtec was discussed, along with how to publish quality books by local people. This is what is needed most, because a large percentage of the population is not literate and this alternative to literacy, through their native language, is the only hope they have to become literate. It requires that the institutions that have literacy as their charge carry out this noble task honestly and with love for the Mexico we all want.

The authorities of San Pedro Jicayán are sure that being able to write in their native language will enable people to overcome the sense of inferiority that has been so prevalent these long years in these pueblos. Writing would become the obligation of everyone—children, young adults, and adults would form groups to develop the skills for creating a literature from their vast knowledge. This effort would not merely start the development of distinct areas of self-study; it would be a useful mechanism for improving life and for finding the means for projecting the important knowledge of the people.

Comments By Some Readers

It is sad to find oneself among people who have not learned to read and write. The programs designed to teach this skill often are unsuccessful in the pueblos because people are not convinced that they need to be literate to survive. This was, in fact, the case with a person who was at the presentation of my book in my village. "I want you to give me one of these books", she said. "I don't know how to read but I will get my children to read it to me."

Hearing these words makes us consider two things. First, we see that young women, 30 to 40 years old, are illiterate.¹⁰ Second, we see the importance of having a written book in the native language. It is clear that if someone manages to read a chapter aloud from this book, it will surely bring forth commentaries and reflections from the people around them. These commentaries would be fruitful in the sense that the material would become enriched and the people themselves would be writing about themes that they most enjoy.

With the presentation of the book, potential readers are created—men and women, people of the pueblo, teachers—from whom I have received many comments. One of those comments reflects the consequence of lack of literacy in the native language: "I am reading your book", said one person, "but I must tell you that when I finish reading a page I feel like I've just eaten

totopos".¹¹

As I have commented, we have many, many examples of how women are the vehicles of cultural development. It is through women that the different ways of being and thinking have been preserved. It is our challenge to provide women with what they need to continue fighting for the greatness of the values of cultures.

Only by writing about things that are of interest in the native language can we put culture in its rightful place. Our obligation as native writers is to share our experiences with the people of our pueblos and not merely sit behind a desk.

The method of computer-based reading and writing is an effective, indispensable resource for strengthening that part of indigenous life dealing with intercultural relations. Most of all, this method has the potential of promoting the content of indigenous cultures and of producing published text in native languages—two of the most strategic needs in bilingual education. For these things to happen, Indians—men and women alike—must have access to the most advanced technologies available, particularly the technologies that mean greater community development. People must be endowed, in other words, with the instruments that make them part of the universal process of learning and study of reality.

Knowing the situation in the pueblos, and being aware of the enthusiasm that women have for continuing to develop their cultures, I believe that an effective way to maintain those cultures is to develop the writing of indigenous languages. The institutions focused on education and literacy must put their words into action so that women can combine their efforts and share their experiences with others in their pueblos. For this reason I suggest that those institutions establish what I call women's schools where old women and adult women in their middle years can prepare the young women of a village for life, using a model that comes from their own pueblos, achieving at the same time the strengthening of the local cultures.

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Notes

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1. Maestra de Educación Indígena del Instituto Estatal de Educación Pública de Oaxaca

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2. The name of the pueblo comes from three words in Mixtec. Ñuu means pueblo, place, nation, or population. Chikua'a is a composite from either chii (grandfather) or chi'i (mushroom) and kua'a, which can mean a lot or enough, or the colors red or blonde. The meanings most accepted are 1) pueblo where there are a lot of red mushrooms and 2) pueblo of the fair-skinned grandfather. According to local history, the cacique, or strongman was an old man who had a fair complexion, a descendant of Spaniards. He was in charge of the pueblo's map. This map is discussed in González 1993 (p. 57). (It is also referred to in endnote 8. HRB.)

The word *pueblo* means 'village' or 'community'. However, it also means 'people who share a common identity' and is often used to refer to an ethnic group. HRB.

Jícaras are a species of gourd that is used widely in Mexico as a drinking cup. HRB.

3. *Indigenista* refers to people and institutions that are concerned with things Indian. Indians (*indígenas*) in Mexico rarely have any role in indigenista institutions. HRB.
4. Here González refers to the *cargo* system, in which people take on material obligations in support of a fiesta. One family (a husband and wife) is assigned the role of *mayordomo*. They provide the music or the fireworks, the food, the drink, or the costs of a special Mass in church. The financial burden can be very heavy. Friends, neighbors, and fictive kin (*compadres*) of those who have such *cargos* are expected to pitch in with donations of labor or of food—sometimes even of money. HRB.
5. This article was written in mid-1994. For most of that year, the Mexican peso traded at just over three per U.S. dollar. In December 1994 the peso began a major devaluation. HRB
6. The *cotón* is the traditional cotton shirt and the *calzón* is the pair of traditional baggy white pants. Tortillas are cooked on a (traditionally ceramic) *comal*. *Ollas* are ceramic pots, *cántaros* are ceramic pitchers, and *sahumerios* are censers used for censuring images of saints, as well as corpses, foods, the sick, and people in general. HRB.
7. The *metate* is the stone on which maize is ground with a stone pestle. HRB
8. Each of these dances is different. Each is danced by 10 to 15 couples. In *tejorones*, 10 to 15 couples disguised as Mestizos wear finely made masks with features of Spaniards. One woman is dressed in Indian costume and a sombrero. Two of the dancers wear Mestizo sombreros, carry lassos for roping cattle, and wear masks that have features of very old people. They all wear plumes of feathers and carry gourd rattles. This dance is described in González Ventura 1992, 1993 (p. 73).

In *mascaritas*, 10 or more couples are disguised as Mestizos. The women dress in stylish clothes and fancy slippers. They have exaggerated busts and wear masks with very fine features. The men wear masks and sombreros. Two or three of the men carry lassos for roping cattle and wear leather chaps that are used for riding bulls.

In the *tigre* dance, a man carries a rope and wears a tiger mask. A child with a rope and a dog mask follows the tigre around. There is also a man dressed as a Mestizo. He has a sombrero, wears a mask of a black man, and carries a rifle. Another man is dressed as an adult Mestiza woman who follows her husband around. Finally, there are six or eight couples of men, without masks, dressed in very beautiful Indian costume. They dance as they pass by the tigre and after the tigre has been killed.

In *diablos* there are an indeterminate number of half-naked adult men and boys—the more the better. They wear shorts and various kinds of masks, from the most hair-raising to that of fighters. They have red and yellow circles painted on their arms and legs. This dance is each year in February on the Tuesday of *carnaval*.

In *toros* a man in a bull's mask is chased by a boy who wears a dog mask. These two are part of the group that does the tejonones.

9. González refers to a Colonial-era map on cloth that is similar to the Lienzos of Zacatepec described by Smith (1975: 96). HRB
10. I must make clear that, though women are more handicapped in the sense that they have fewer opportunities to go to school, men are not far behind in terms of disadvantage. For teachers in the Indian education system, men and women suffer the same disadvantage.
11. In other words, even when the material is in the native language, it takes a big effort to read it. This effort is compared to eating *totopos* (large, toasted tortillas); after eating several, your jaw aches.