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Saving and Strengthening Indigenous Mexican Languages: The CELIAC Experience

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Introduction

All languages are vehicles of culture, transmitters of civilization, and instruments for teaching. They can also be the media of acculturation, deculturation, and alienation. Up to now, colonialist thinking has rejected the idea that native languages are real languages. But native languages carry the contents of the long lives of the people who speak them.

According to Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution: "The Mexican nation has a multicultural composition, stemming originally from its indigenous communities. The law will protect and promote the development of their languages, cultures, usages, customs, resources and specific forms of social organization and will guarantee to the members of those communities effective access to the jurisdiction of the state." And Article 27 guarantees that: "The law will protect the integrity of the lands of the indigenous peoples."

In many parts of the Mexican Republic, as in other countries, indigenous people suffer racial discrimination. Their cultures are considered inferior to the cultures of the powerful societies, and the multicultural character of those nations is denied by the people in power. Many ethnic groups have accepted the views of the government authorities.

The native languages in Mexico suffer continuous displacement and absorption by Spanish, which is more universal and is the language of the privileged, dominant sectors. The indigenous languages, however, are our mother tongues. In them we hear the echo of the voices of our ancestors. Those languages awaken our ancestral pride; they bring us closer to the popular poetic forms and to the songs and sayings of our people. Despite the marginal status to which indigenous languages have been relegated, many people still speak those languages. For many, those languages are their only means of communication.¹

Before the coming of the Europeans, native languages showed clearly their capacity for expression and communication. We can see this in the clear grammatical categories, in the richness of the lexicons, and in the ability of those languages to express the most complex thoughts. Oppression, subordination, and the diffusion of the native communities are reflected today in the lack of coherence in the languages, in the loss of lexical richness,² and the loss of language creativity.

The imposition of foreign ideology is evident in the lexicon of our languages. The

Spaniards rejected and tried to destroy all our concepts about things sacred, all native Mesoamerican ideas about the world. The speakers of the languages themselves forgot those concepts since most native people were reduced to servitude.

According to the dominant ideology, the different Latin American countries each comprise one nation that encompasses all the different ethnic groups in the region. By this logic, the Spanish language and Western culture are the only true national groups. Here I offer a richer idea of society, one that grants the native cultures and languages in the region the status of national communities and national languages.

Language, Identity, and Writing

Language characterizes the individual. When we say "I am a Ñähñu" (Otomí) or "I am a Ñusavi" (Mixtec), etc., we identify ourselves with the nationality or ethnic group that speaks that language. In fact, I see language as fundamental to the consolidation of ethnic or national unity. The consciousness of belonging to a group develops, above all, from speaking that group's language. To the extent that identification with a group grows, so grows the speaking of the language.

Those who become politically conscious of their oppressed existence know that they have to stand up and be counted by supporting their language and culture and affirming "I am who I am". This remains true even though our languages have been weakened by five hundred years of survival under adversity. Indigenous people are forced to learn Spanish and to adopt alien values because of their need to be involved in the economic and social development of the larger society. But without our languages, it is impossible to recover and develop a sense of national identity.³

Indigenous languages must become written languages. This will open possibilities for enriching and developing the spoken language. Besides preserving our languages, written language has, in my view, a greater capacity for abstraction. It also adapts quickly to cultural and social changes (and can thus be enriched indefinitely), and it communicates across time and space.⁴

In development, the areas of highest priority are health, the integrity of judicial and other governmental organizations, the economy, and communications. In of communications, the strategic issue is literacy. Lack of literacy is the most important factor in the deterioration and abandonment of indigenous languages. It has cut Indian peoples off from their past by preventing them from documenting their own history. It has also isolated indigenous people from other peoples of the world, especially from the most technologically advanced societies, much of whose creativity is expressed in writing.

Kept in an exclusively oral, nonwritten status, indigenous languages cannot preserve native traditions. Native values lose their force by being unconnected to a concrete body of writing that protects against the deformations and additions that are the characteristic result of purely oral communication. The problem, then, is that literacy in native languages plays no role in the everyday life of the Indian communities of Mexico. In those communities, native literacy simply does not exist. For the people there, literacy is understood to be a vehicle only for expressing ideas in the national language, Spanish. Literacy, then, becomes a vehicle for alienating native people from their own cultures.⁵

If we can create the conditions under which our indigenous languages are involved in all parts of our spiritual and material lives, then it will be possible to preserve and develop the

writing of these languages. This is how our languages will improve and eventually become normative in everyday life.

To assure the preservation of indigenous languages and to avoid the extinction and extermination of the speakers of those languages, the values, beliefs, customs, and cultural practices of the native communities must be respected. This must be done in conformity with the rights established in the constitution. The direct participation of native peoples is essential in development of their writing system and in development of their language in all forms of communication, including film, radio, television, and national newspapers.

Unfortunately, most of us do not know how to write our languages, how to work with the world of graphic symbols, and how to recognize in those symbols the languages we speak.

Technology and Literacy

Development today depends on technology. Education and cultural activities, in particular, benefit from communication technology. That technology increases the possibilities for creative activity and it accelerates the diffusion of ideas. The socially and economically marginalized peoples of our country are also marginalized from modern means of communication. As Indians, for example, we are prevented from expressing our ideas, our desires, and our needs because we lack access to modern mass communication.

The communications media are controlled by those who have the technological power; indigenous peoples must gain a voice in these media. Among the artifacts dedicated to communication, computers have the greatest impact on our lives. Even in developing countries, computers are no longer items of luxury or mystery, but are now in everyday use in work, study, and research.

We must remember that the computer does not make decisions or judgments by itself and that the object of a computer's work depends on the user. Above all we must remember that human language is a system that is both continuously creative and immersed in the social and historical realities of its community of speakers. In other words, the computer must be subject to the needs of each language.

Using these machines, we can write in our own, original languages. With these new instruments in our hands, we indigenous people can come to know one another better and we can form a unified commitment to the future of our communities. Through the written word we can achieve unity and we can present our languages in their real form, not in the deformed image given by Western ethnocentric thinking.

With the introduction of modern technology, particularly computers, the written language has become a more and more efficient means of communication. Incorporating this technology will accelerate the development and progress of our languages. On the social level, the association of written indigenous language with modern means of communication and information technology will result in greater participation of indigenous people in intellectual and cultural life. This, in turn, will result in the conservation and dissemination of indigenous wisdom and worldviews.

Bilingual-Bicultural Education

Throughout history, formal education has played a fundamental role in the destiny of peoples. Education has been characterized by an elitist attitude, and in the service of the dominant class, it

has been an instrument of oppression and of reproduction of dominant social systems. Over time, education has imposed dominant ideologies and rejected the multicultural, multiethnic, multilingual character of subordinate groups.

Today, the system in place in Mexico continues to promote both the speaking of Spanish to the exclusion of other languages and the implementation of a vertical curriculum, ignoring the languages and cultures of indigenous people. To us, the educational system is based on an alien model. In it the processes of learning and teaching are completely expository, and children are simply receptors of information; they are not allowed to develop any critical or participatory capacities.

Against this traditional model of education, a proposed alternative system of bilingual-bicultural education is emerging in Mexico. It focuses on respect for and development of our ancestral languages and cultures. The proposal would permit children to be educated in their own languages and to learn their native cultural values while systematically learning the official national language. The objective is for children to achieve communicative competence in two languages, to value and respect their own culture and that of others, and to develop in a multicultural environment.

Bilingual education should not be asymmetric; that is, it should not focus only on Western content. This only hurts the development of indigenous languages and the revaluing of indigenous cultures. The bilingual education programs to date have not satisfied the expectations of our peoples. Those programs have failed because the community of educators does not yet have the consciousness required for promoting structural reform in the society through the implementation of the bilingual-bicultural model.

To succeed, it is necessary to create and to systematize a method of education that is in concert with the realities of local populations. Those populations must also take responsibility for strengthening their own education as a way of combatting the traditional educational system. To undertake a system of truly bilingual education, we must have the human resources—trained teachers who come from the local indigenous communities, and who take part personally and directly in the task of educating their people. This new focus must become part of the whole education system as we try to achieve multiculturalism and equality of status between local and national languages and cultures.

In fact, bilingualism among many indigenous peoples is riven with conflict. This is a serious challenge and the situation is very complex. Making use of indigenous languages involves more than just solving linguistic problems; it involves sociological, psychological, and anthropological problems as well.

At the village level, bilingual teachers play a crucial role. They can use literacy training to consolidate the system of cultural domination or they can use it in service to *etnodesarrollo*.

Etnodesarrollo is the policy that drives some *indigenista* institutions today. The objects of development in etnodesarrollo are the various indigenous communities, conceived as total social, cultural, and historical units, that have been marginalized and dominated by the nation state. According to the etnodesarrollo perspective, the development of Indian communities across the Americas requires the transformation of national systems of ethnic dominance. Specifically, it requires formal, legal recognition by the nation states of the Americas of their multiethnic, multicultural nature.

History to date shows that this is only possible with direct pressure from the indigenous communities themselves. Economic, social, cultural, and political strengthening of Indian communities will come about only when Indians make conscious decisions to start the process.

This is the only way in which we will be able to exert pressure for change on interethnic relations.

This is what we are trying to promote at CELIAC, the Centro Editorial de Literatura Indígena, A. C. in Oaxaca, Mexico. The members of the board of directors of CELIAC are indigenous people, mostly bilingual teachers who are speakers of N̄ah̄ñu, Mazatec, Mixtec, and Zapotec. The distinctive feature of CELIAC is the use of microcomputers and word-processing programs that have been modified to permit the writing of indigenous languages and the use of modern printers that permit the local publication of original texts in those languages.

At CELIAC, using personal computers, Josefa González and I teach bilingual teachers, and campesinos and housewives, to write in their native languages. The course of training takes three months, after which the writers return, with their computers, to their pueblos to study and write about their local cultures. This intensive labor produces a body of native literature, in the various indigenous languages, on topics of local interest.

The use of computers in the project is a technological victory that narrows the gulf between developed and developing peoples. Bilingual participants use computers to write in their own languages about their lives, their customs, their legends, histories, natural medicine, and so on. The object is to normalize the use of indigenous languages—that is, to make the use of indigenous languages a normal, everyday thing.

The method of computer-based reading and writing is both possible and necessary for the production of educational materials and for the production of all native literature. There is need for more centers like the one in Oaxaca. This will expand the possibilities for education while allowing for the historical, social, cultural, and linguistic norms of our communities.

History of the Oaxaca Native Literacy Project

The project began in 1962 when I met Russell Bernard. I am a native of the community of Ndäxt'oo^ho (Orizabita), in the municipio of Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo. At the time, I was a student in secondary school. In those days, buses were practically unheard of, and my school, Escuela Secundaria Justo Sierra por Cooperación, was the only secondary school within a radius of 40 kilometers. I had to walk 24 kilometers round-trip each day to attend classes in the town of Nts'o'tk'aani, or Ixmiquilpan. I did this for three years. Since I was a speaker of Mezquital N̄ah̄ñu, Bernard was interested in my services as an "informant". (The N̄ah̄ñu were previously—and incorrectly—called Otomí, a name given to us by the prehispanic Mexicas.) About 300,000 people in central Mexico speak Mezquital N̄ah̄ñu. There are six dialects: two in the states of Hidalgo and Querétaro, one in the state of México, and one in the state of Veracruz. The largest dialect is Mezquital, spoken in Hidalgo by perhaps 90,000 people.

The reigning policy in the area of linguistics and education was to teach Spanish and to discourage the speaking and writing of indigenous languages. Bernard and I discussed this during the summer of 1971. Maybe, we thought, an orthography of N̄ah̄ñu, developed by a N̄ah̄ñu, would be successful in getting people to accept the idea of writing in their own language. Bernard was thinking of writing an ethnography of the N̄ah̄ñu culture. During our discussion, I suggested that I would like to write about the culture of my own people, in N̄ah̄ñu. Bernard could serve as my "informant" about writing ethnography, entering my writing into a computer. With the aid of the computer we could produce more texts in less time. We could, in other words, take advantage of what the computer really is, an instrument for doing work.

We began by producing a book of folk tales and jokes from tape recordings that I made

(Bernard and Salinas 1976). I transcribed those recordings in Ñähñu and, with Bernard looking on so he could learn more about the grammar and vocabulary, I translated them word for word into Spanish. Working with the original Ñähñu and the word-for-word Spanish, Bernard translated the tales into English and entered the corpus into a mainframe word processor. Later, I wrote about the environment of the Ñähñu, their customs, festivals, and other ethnographic themes (see Salinas and Bernard 1978).

Until 1983, we used the same system: we translated the Ñähñu into Spanish phrase by phrase and then into English. We used this system until 1983. I began then to write, not with a pen, but with an Apple computer and a Ñähñu word processor that Bernard and his student, Michael Evans, had put together.⁶ I also began producing a free translation in Spanish, directly from my head to the keyboard. In this way, the initial chapters of what may be the first written version of Ñähñu history were produced (see Bernard and Salinas 1989).

In 1985, Scott Robinson, at the Ixtapalapa campus of the Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana gave the project an important boost by allowing personnel from the Dirección General de Educación Indígena (where I was working) to use the university's Apple computers. We used those computers for two years, during which time we printed 15 teachers' manuals for the instruction of reading and writing in the same number of Mexican Indian languages.

In 1987 we developed plans to move the project to Oaxaca (where the project continues today), calling it the Project for the Preservation of Indigenous Literature. August 28, 1988 was a significant day in the annals of indigenous literature in Mexico. On that day, Josefa González (a Mixteca) and I initiated the project at the Oaxaca branch of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social.⁷

We began the project with two Apple computers and two printers. González started writing an ethnography in Tu'un Nuu Savi, and, with the participation of the entire community of Dextho in the municipio of Ixmiquilpan, Hidalgo, I started an ethnohistory project in Ñähñu.

We used the Gutenberg word-processing program. With that program one could design any characters one needed. This led to the possibility of using the most complex alphabets as determined by the native authors who came to work in the project.⁸ With this facility to develop alphabets as needed, we were able to train two Ayuuk (Mixe) male school teachers and two Tsa Ko Win (Chinantec) female teachers.

Soon the list of trainees grew. As of this writing we have trained 121 people, including bilingual school teachers, other professionals, campesinos, and housewives. Of the 121 (including 87 men and 34 women), 93 are speakers of 14 indigenous languages in Mexico, 23 are speakers of Quechua and Aymara from Argentina, Ecuador, Bolivia, Chile, and Peru, and one is a Shuar from Ecuador. The remaining 4 participants were Mestizos. Most of the Mexican participants (86 of the 93 speakers of indigenous languages) were from the state of Oaxaca (23 Zapotecs, 17 Mixtecs, 12 Mixes, 10 Mazatecs, 9 Chinantecs, 8 Amuzgos, 3 Chatinos, and 4 Triques). The other Mexican Indians include 1 Zoque, 1 Tzotzil, and 1 Tzeltal from Chiapas, 2 Ñähñu from Hidalgo, 1 Totonac from Vera Cruz, and 1 Chontal from Tabasco. We have recently heard from the Chontal that he has established a small center based on the CELIAC model in Tabasco with local government support.

The main object of the project is to use advanced technologies (computers, laser printers, etc.) to support native authors who are interested in rescuing, preserving, developing, improving, and systematizing their efforts to write books. In the past, such writing efforts have been blocked or forgotten forever. None of the native authors in the project have any sense of inferiority about writing in native languages. Nor are they reluctant to use the computers, which today are

producing texts that are especially subtle, including poetry. The writers trained at the project use computers every day, just as in prior times our grandfathers used bows and arrows with similar alacrity.

The project has achieved several of its objectives, thanks to the support of and good relations with various institutions. These include the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS), the Dirección General de Educación Indígena (DGEI), the Instituto Indigenista Interamericano (III), and the University of Florida. These institutions signed a memorandum of agreement in May 1988 to support the project.

The DGEI, a directorate under the Ministry of Public Education, assigned Josefa González and me to train indigenous writers in how to use the computer for the development of their respective languages. In some cases, this assignment included going out to rural schools in Oaxaca and Veracruz. Recently, we installed computers in some of these schools so they could continue to develop indigenous writing. Support from the DGEI began with the administration of Salamón Nahmad and has continued through the administrations of Cándido Coheto Martínez, Enrique Ku Herrera, and Ludka de Gortari Krauss.

For several years in the beginning of the project, the III (first under the administration of Drs. Oscar Arze Quintanilla and Diego Iturralde, and then under the administration of Drs. José Matos Mar and Alberto Cheng Hurtado) contributed supplemental support for the teachers who were assigned to the project by the DGEI. Of the 24 South American Indians who have been trained on the project, 23 were supported by the III, with supplemental support from the government of the state of Oaxaca for local accommodations. Dr. Norman Whitten sponsored the Shuar participant.

CIESAS is a network of research centers in Mexico. The Oaxaca branch of CIESAS provided housing for the project from 1987 through 1993, first under the administration of Dr. Salamón Nahmad and later under the administration of Dr. María de los Angeles Romero Frizi. This local support in Oaxaca was backed up by support from the national directors of CIESAS, first Dr. Leonel Durán Solís and later Dr. Teresa Rojas Rabiela. During Nahmad's administration, and at his initiative, CIESAS helped found a series of centers for ethnic research at strategic locations of the state of Oaxaca. These local cultural research centers gave further impetus for the development of indigenous writers. The local centers were developed and run by colleagues who had been trained on our project in writing native languages on the computer.

CIESAS also copublished, with the financial support of the government of the state of Oaxaca, several books produced by project authors, some in monolingual editions and others in bilingual editions. Support from the state came first from the administration of Heladio Ramírez López and recently under the governorship of Diodoro Carrasco Altamirano. The Department of Education of the State of Oaxaca has also supported the project from the beginning.

The University of Florida has provided technical support and equipment through its Department of Anthropology. Bernard and his students (Michael Evans, Gery Ryan, Christopher McCarty, and Kenneth Sturrock) have taught project members to use WordPerfect, have programmed any special symbols needed by the various native authors in the project, and have helped us join the Internet.

Through professional contacts, Bernard secured gifts of computers (from the Apple Corporation and from the Instituto Tecnológico y Estudios Superiores de Monterrey) and financial support for the project. Since 1989, grants from the Jessie Ball DuPont Foundation have allowed us to support native authors during their stay in Oaxaca (while they learned to use the computers to write books in their languages). In early 1994, with continued support from the

Jessie Ball DuPont Foundation, CELIAC moved into its own building in Oaxaca and began an independent program of publishing books in indigenous languages, particularly books that are of interest to and that respond directly to the particular needs of each indigenous community.

A Program for Action

Indigenous cultures are part of the richness of humanity, and we must take concrete steps to promote the development of those cultures. We must respect the diversity among those cultures so that native groups can exercise fully their rights to equal participation in national societies.

Conscious of this need and valuing the productivity of the indigenous communities of the Americas, the central objective of CELIAC is to preserve and promote indigenous language writing through the publication and distribution of literary works by indigenous authors. To achieve this objective we have developed the following particular objectives:

- (1) Promote training in the writing of native languages by setting up computer-based centers where native-language literary works of different genres can be produced. We have installed two computers in each of the *casas del pueblo* ('community houses') of Tamazulapam (Mixe), Temazcal (Mazatec), and in the Mixtec villages of Jicayán, and Jamiltepec in the district of Jamiltepec. These are all in the state of Oaxaca.
- (2) Extend the project into other areas of social, economic, and cultural creativity besides the writing and publishing of books.
- (3) Establish a system of national and international financial support so that CELIAC can be a place where indigenous people who speak different languages exchange experiences.
- (4) Promote the creation of more centers like CELIAC for the writing of indigenous literature in indigenous languages. This will lead to deeper understanding of the grammar of those languages and to exchange experiences among indigenous authors in the methods used for the creation of literary works.
- (5) Find appropriate distribution channels for CELIAC books, not just at the community level but also at the regional, state, national, and international levels (the participation of the Ashoka Foundation in Mexico has been helpful in this regard.) We must also create incentives for the distribution of indigenous literature so that it becomes competitive with literature of other languages.
- (6) Propose and promote the development of alternative literacy programs at the village level in order to combat the low level of educational attainment in those communities.
- (7) Work with established publishing houses to reinforce the publishing work of CELIAC and to encourage the mass media (like radio and television companies, video movie production companies, and the press) to do documentaries on CELIAC to make people in the larger society aware of our efforts.
- (8) Publicize the works of CELIAC authors and artists through recitals, meetings,

conferences, theater events, and local community artistic demonstrations.

Local community interest in expanding the work of CELIAC is apparent. Some people have begun to compete for grants, offered by foundations and by national and international institutions, in order to get support for CELIAC projects. Many indigenous people lack the training needed to produce competitive applications. Despite this deficit, by joining with CELIAC several have won support.

Two successful applications have come in from Santo Domingo Yojovi, in the Sierra Juárez, and from Yaganiza, in the Cajonos sector, also in the Sierra Norte. (The application from Santo Domingo Yojovi was supported by the French foundation Traditions for Tomorrow, and the application from Yaganiza was supported by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista in Mexico.) These are very isolated communities. In each case, it took us eight hours by foot from the nearest road to bring in a computer. This obstacle was unimportant compared to the importance of realizing the objectives of the project.⁹

The Impact of the Project

The CELIAC project will surely have a major impact because it works directly with the people of the different native cultures of Mexico in the rescue, development, production, and dissemination of a genuine indigenous literature. This literature is being created and developed by individual native speakers of those languages and, in some cases, in conjunction with whole communities of speakers.

This project also involves bringing indigenous people directly into the study of their own people and moves away from the traditional anthropological method that involves an external observer and an observed culture. In this project, members of each ethnic group investigate their own cultures, not simply for the benefit of the social sciences, but also to contribute to the preservation of their cultures and to help their communities understand themselves.

A method like this should produce a profound renewal in anthropology, with new perspectives on the knowledge of different societies and on the cultures of indigenous people. Perhaps many specialists do not share our ideas. But those of us who are working with these ideas every day can say with confidence that this is the best option that has presented itself in this era of modernization.

Several people from the writing project have founded and are active in local research centers (centers of cultural investigation) among the various ethnic groups in Oaxaca. These independent local research centers are put together, managed, and directed by indigenous people. The centers promote the study of local cultures. The emphasis is on the revitalization of the local language, the rescue of local oral tradition, and support for the creators of indigenous art and fiction.

Conclusion

Recent enthusiasm by non-Indians for the celebration of the Columbian quincentenary was, for most indigenous groups, a reaffirmation of a history of exploitation and discrimination. In Mexico, there are still no indigenous members of congress or senators to propose solutions to the problems that native people face every day in matters of subsistence. But politically aware indigenous people are concerned deeply that as the 21st century approaches, we are still the

object of colonial practices.

The promotion of *etnodesarrollo* among indigenous people, by indigenous people, and for indigenous people is basic. It must be done, however, by taking advantage of high technology. Just as technology is required to produce greater quantities of products and products that are more competitive in national and international markets, so is it required for the development of native literature by native intellectuals. Those intellectuals must create confidence among speakers of their languages within native communities and they must create works that add to the body of international literature.

In Mexico, indigenist institutions, through interinstitutional agreements, have trained two academic generations of ethnolinguists.¹⁰ These professionals must take the leadership in preserving linguistic and cultural traditions in native Mexican groups. We must be alert, however, to how new methods are applied so that we do not fall into the trap of becoming "professional informants". In that case, the beneficiaries will continue to be those who have always used us for their personal gain.

Ethnic development will never be possible without the direct participation of the people who represent the original cultures of Mesoamerica. When development ideas are put forward by indigenous intellectuals, the so-called great minds of the social sciences, and the institutions to which they belong, often reject those proposals or appropriate them. In the latter case, the original authors of those ideas are cast aside with others taking the credit. This is a sort of anthropological "coyoteo".¹¹

These professionals get enormous budgets from federal and state authorities for projects based on others' ideas, but project goals are not achieved, because the implementers do not really understand the ideas. They apply old, alien methods and, far from perpetuating the use of indigenous languages, they hurt those languages more.

Some people, seeing the positive results obtained by applying native methods to the problem, accept the ideas as their own. They only do this, however, to justify their own efforts. Since they do not speak the languages of the communities where they work, their projects and programs are not accepted in those communities. Of course, not all social scientists operate on bad faith. The ideal would be for them to work together with indigenous people (as some now do) where the development of native languages is concerned.

The best solution to this problem is for the authorities to channel resources directly to the indigenous groups, avoiding whenever possible those intermediaries who present themselves as new prophets in preserving native languages and cultures. At the same time, the indigenous people must be assured that they enjoy, without discrimination, the same rights, opportunities, and obligations as other citizens of the country. The indigenous people must also receive their fair share of the advanced technology and other support for economic, social, and cultural development.

Etnodesarrollo, in short, must be able to sustain a pluralistic nation state, one that is strengthened by the richness of its ethnic and cultural diversity. It must be supported by education programs that are no longer instruments of dominant populations and that contribute to the revitalizing and positive valuation of our ancestral cultures.

The modernization of the state must not marginalize the native languages and cultures. We believe that as a nation, we must develop without abandoning our roots. The original languages of Mexico are part of our national heritage and must be rescued, recognized, and respected. Above all, professionals among the native peoples must be given the technology with which to develop their writing. Computers should be installed in strategic places across Mexico

so that all interested people can have access to the technology. We make this proposal because we are sure of the effectiveness of computers in producing published texts in native languages.

The transition from oral to written literature obliges us to build our own spaces with the object of slowing down the process of acculturation and alienation leveled on native societies by the dominant society. Our object must also be to break down the barriers that have kept us from communicating and understanding completely our conditions as citizens.

The writing of our native languages and of Spanish by computer lets us now think about the involvement of native people in the economic, scientific, and technological parts of our society and of the world. The initiative and participation of indigenous people in all those spheres of life will be decisive in assuring the rights of ethnic communities to preserve and develop their own identity and the cultural elements that comprise that identity.

Thus, we understand that the writing of indigenous languages will allow us to recapture and nurture the cultural, scientific, and technical traditions of indigenous peoples. Then, the next generations can revitalize and enrich those traditions, and in the future indigenous people will be able to read and write in their own languages and will be able to produce and distribute their own publications.

Indigenous languages in the communities are threatened, but the knowledge that exists in these communities is neither dead nor used up. It hangs on tenaciously in the memory of the men, women, and children who speak and sing daily among themselves and with nature. A generation of writers is emerging who are rescuing, enriching, and giving life and vigor to the languages of their pueblos. Our objective is to achieve the flowering of all those languages.

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Notes

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1. The population of speakers of indigenous languages in Mexico is a matter of dispute. According to Pardo (1993: 111) the 1990 census counted 5,282,347 speakers of indigenous languages, with about 20% (1,018,106) in Oaxaca. However, many bilinguals fail to identify themselves to the census takers as speakers of indigenous languages. My guess is that there are at least 8 million speakers of indigenous languages in Mexico. The number of monolinguals is even less certain. For Oaxaca, for example, the 1990 census reports that about 22% of the native language speakers are monolingual (Pardo 1993: 132). However, some census takers report as bilingual any speaker of a native language who can say even a few words in Spanish. Thus, Pardo (1993: 113) estimates that up to half the speakers of native languages in Oaxaca, at least, may be monolingual. HRB.
 2. Here Salinas refers to the loss of indigenous glosses for everyday items. One expects, he has told me, to find indigenized glosses from Spanish for things that were not part of the indigenous world. In contrast, he sees the use of loan words from Spanish (properly indigenized) for human body parts, for example, to be evidence of deterioration in indigenous languages. HRB.
 3. Salinas refers throughout to "national" identity rather than "ethnic identity". His use of the term "national" is deliberate. He does not mean a politically autonomous group, with its own army, its own taxing authority, its own foreign policy. He does, however, envision a complex nation state in which indigenous languages and territories are respected by the structures of the nation state. HRB.
 4. Whether written language has greater capacity than spoken language for abstraction is, of course, a debated topic. For contrasting views, see Goody (1977), Ong (1982), and Finnegan (1988). HRB
 5. Ironically, literature in native languages *does* exist in Mexico and its existence underscores the problem. With a few important exceptions, the native literature that exists in Mexico has been produced and is used exclusively by white and Mestizo professionals who are interested in native languages for reasons of their own. These professionals hardly ever associate themselves with the idea of development in our pueblos.
 6. We built the Ñähñu word processor with the Gutenberg system. HRB.
 7. The support of Leonel Durán, Teresa Rojas, and Salamón Nahmad (national and regional directors of CIESAS during this period) was particularly important and is gratefully acknowledged.
 8. At CELIAC we use alphabets that make sense to the speakers of the languages. We hold to the thesis that the speakers of each language must decide how the language will be preserved—that is, what alphabet to use.
 9. Many Mexican pueblos now have electricity even though they are not accessible by road. Another computer was set up in San Felipe, Tilpan, a Mazatec community on the shore of the lake formed by the Miguel Alemán hydroelectric dam. The dam provides electricity to the community, and the San Felipe school now has a computer, but CELIAC personnel

had to travel 45 minutes by boat from the nearest road to bring in that computer. CELIAC receives donations of used computers from individuals and from organizations. The computer in San Felipe is one of these. HRB.

10. Indigenist institutions are devoted to indigenous affairs but not necessarily run by indigenous persons. In the program referred to here, during the 1970s and 1980s young Indians from various language groups were trained at the B.A. level in the field of ethnolinguistics. The idea was for them to return to their communities, continue their studies of local languages, and serve as intellectual leaders whose efforts would strengthen the native languages and cultures of Mexico. HRB.
11. *Coyote* is the famous trickster, or hustler character in Native American folklore. Besides being the familiar animal, a coyote in modern Mexican usage is a sharp dealer, someone not to be trusted. HRB.