Social cohesion in Chiapas

The State of Chiapas is located in the Mexican southeastern region and is mainly the cradle of ancient cultures of Mayan and Zoque origin. These cultures complement and merge together with the distinctive natural wealth of this State, thus becoming a unique body and a unique element because, since the original cultures, men and nature have been in close association with each other. That is why life cannot be explained without the benevolence of Mother Earth, which is still kindly providing its sons and daughters with food and beverages. In turn, they hold a number of festivities to show their gratitude and to be in harmony with Mother Earth.

Native people display great wealth in all their intangible cultural manifestation. Their main social and collective expression lies in festivities, gathering not only members of their organization but also those individuals who make their celebration possible. Therefore, such festivities involve those in charge of preparing and distributing food and beverages, as well as those who assist during the different ritual moments.

Throughout the year, several families and individuals who raise animals (pigs and bulls) for the banquet and plant corn and beans (using their leaves to
wrap the food), join those having kitchen utensils and ceremonial costumes to form a vital group helping in the celebration. Therefore, cooperation and community work are present in the preparation of traditional festivities and ceremonies. Mutual assistance is indispensable because today’s assistants know that, in the future, they will need the support of those who are serving them now. It should be stressed that the individual in charge of holding this festivity establishes a close relationship with relatives, friends, and other community members since, in his constant coming and going during the preparations, he is constantly interacting with many of them. This is a cohesion process between the individual and the society in which he lives.

There are different cohesion and coexistence circles depending on the cultural heritage involved. In this case, I have taken the ritual and ceremonial festivities since they are the most noticeable celebrations gathering a larger number of participants.

When several individuals are in charge of the celebration, their ceremonial discourses serve to prepare their hearts and minds for the ceremonial service focusing on unity, coexistence, and brotherhood. For example, during the celebration of the K’in tajimol festivity (or carnival), where four individuals are in charge, a passage of the ceremonial discourse reads:

(Official translation)

Not in vain they were named
Not in vain they were chosen
Not in vain they upheld
Not in vain they carried
The florid title
The florid service
Thanks to the favor granted
By the florid God
By the florid Jesus Christ
They were even granted
The sacred glare
The sacred shadow
With their elder brother
With their younger brother
Four were formed
Four were enacted
Four were appointed
Four were chosen
They saw
They observed
Approaching
Coming closer
One day
One year,
Either with goodness
Either with joy
Or with perfume
Of flowers
Of Annunciation Lilies
Their bodies
Their living matter

The brotherhood mentioned is not a biological brotherhood, but a symbolic one; the phrase “with their elder brother / with their younger brother” means that those who were appointed shared their words and thoughts for the preparation of the festivity and that, as confrontations among them were prevented, their minds and hearts acted with lucidity.

Those who accept to be appointed are not only committing themselves and their families but are also committing other community colleagues. Therefore, they play the role of sharing the divinity of the forefathers. Thus, their behavior must be consistent because, while holding this title, they will be under a maturing and awareness-raising process, a better understanding of the system and order governing the people’s life, for they will be a future reference for other celebrants. He who performs the service with order and excellence will be considered an authority, his word would convey the continuity of cultural expressions, and he could become counselor and support for those who will be in charge of the festivity in the future.
The celebration of festivities and ceremonies involve not only adults but also people of all ages: girls, boys, youngsters and the elderly. This participation is a strategy to give continuity and to convey cultural elements. The strength of these expressions in native populations results, to a great extent, from language preservation, that is, the generational dissemination of mother languages to guarantee the transmission of knowledge and the ways to build reality.

As was previously mentioned, the significance of these ceremonies and festivities is such that cooperation bonds go beyond the community itself. Friendship and commercial links are established with members of other communities, either because other communities make ritual costumes, musical instruments or because they plant and harvest inputs for the festivity and, consequently, they also participate.

There are many examples of the impact that this broad participation in the festivities have in both the cultural and economic life. Lauderos de San Juan Chamula make traditional musical instruments to order (harps, guitars, violins and drums) and sell their products to musicians in Chenalhó, Mitontic, San Andrés Larráinzar, Chalchihuitán, Tenejapa, San Juan Cancuc, among others. Something similar happens with the traditional alcoholic beverages made in Altos de Chiapas by one of its municipalities and distributed across the region as an irreplaceable product for celebrations. Another example is the manufacture of ritual garments such as the lambswool jackets that authorities and party celebrants wear in many towns of the region. In every case, the lauderos—beverage manufacturers from San Juan Chamula—gain profits from selling their ceremonial ritual products to members of other communities, therefore, the many manifestations
of traditional cultures have an influence in the economy through this year-round trade,

So far, I have only described a traditional festivity, the k’in tajimol tsotsil, one of the most ancient festivities still preserving many pre-Hispanic elements, as Alejandro Sheseña and Sophia Pince-min Deliberos stated when concluding that:

[…] the correspondence existing between elements shown in the K1549 scene, some features of the current Chenalhó carnival, and certain characteristics found in ancient celebrations of “fateful days” in pre-Hispanic calendars, lead us to conclude that K1549 finally portrays, beyond the specificities of each character, an interesting episode, previously unknown, of the funny Mayan festivities held during the Wayeb4 month, as they would have been held during the first millennium of our era.

This quote refers to the article “Games Festivity: New contributions to the interpretation of the K1549 scene”, the content of which somehow provides evidence of the ritual theater performances among the Mayas. The continuity of some of these performances can be found, for example, in the Chenalhó Carnival and it could be said that this festivity has a pre-Hispanic origin, and has been transmitted from generation to generation through the participation of girls and boys, at early ages, in different activities, enjoying the opportunity of meticulously following each act, therefore familiarizing themselves with the cultural values which will conform their identities.

Other elements of the intangible cultural heritage involve most of the community members, as is the case of the Santa Cruz festivity, which translates into the water and Mother Earth festivity. To obtain the supplies required for this celebration, participation of most of the community members is required. This celebration represents the communion between man and the Earth as a mother and provider of food and beverages. Thus, men participating in the ceremony get inside caves and springs, metaphorically returning to the mother’s womb to beg her, from within, to fight and intercede on their behalf. The men and women guiding the ceremony being carried out by the community through them, request Mother Earth’s benevolence so that crops may grow, springs won’t dry up and the vital liquid reaches each and every person. It is then recalled that it is only on the Mother Earth that food can grow and beverages be produced, and the importance of the celebration for the community is highlighted.

Previously, these festivities were only seen in rural communities, but with indigenous people migrating to the cities, one can witness such celebrations in the suburban areas. The indigenous rituals are adapted to the urban context and to new spaces. Undoubtedly, there are some celebrations that transcend their territory of origin and are performed in other territories. These intangible cultural expressions carried out in new spaces provide a sense of belonging to the individual and allows for the re-interpretation of identities with new elements.

Discussing the different intangible cultural expressions, which have a decisive impact on social cohesion or at least in bringing together the members of a community, is a vast topic. To conclude my brief reference to intangible cultural expressions, considered as the threads that interweave family and social cohesion among indigenous populations, I will refer to the celebration of the Day of the Dead. This is a big festivity in the communities and that is why it is called K’in ch’ulelal in Tsotsil language, the translation being “the festivity of the souls”, who are considered deities who are in the highest together with the divine beings and have the power to intercede on behalf of the living.

The festivity of the souls brings together different groups prior to its celebration. The community organizes groups for the collective purchase of bulls that are sacrificed and distributed among several persons who have contributed in the preparations and payment. This is a first stage of working together, where quantities as well as payment date for what has been consumed are discussed and agreed.

Preparations for the celebration of the festivity of the souls undoubtedly entails a great exchange of farm products to prepare the food and offerings made to the spirits of ancestors and deceased relatives. Year after year, this act nourishes and strengthens coexistence among the living, being the dead the motive of such intense collective interaction. Preparations also include the cleaning of community pantheons, and the community makes the proper arrangements to keep them immaculate and neat for the occasion. These activities help in strengthening family links as well as relations with other members of society.
The climax of this celebration is the festivity in itself, held at the pantheons on November 1st and 2nd, where a big exchange of food and beverages, sadness and happiness, greetings and congratulations takes place as the participants meet their relatives and friends, as well as other community members that for different reasons may have been absent during the year. In short, the Day of the Dead celebration brings men and women together, like in a bunch of flowers, to offer their efforts and work to their dead, who, in turn, ask them to renew the agreement every year: the dead intercede on behalf of the living, and the living shall continue making their offerings to and celebrating the festivity for them, so that cohesion is not only among the living, but also among the latter and the souls.

It is a fact that most festivities and ceremonial celebrations serve as a source to strengthen the sense of belonging of the community as well as cultural and economic ties. It can be seen throughout the year in each act they carry out.

Notes

1Native peoples who have traditionally lived in the western part of the Central American isthmus, currently the Mexican States of Yucatán, Campeche, Quintana Roo (the Yucatán peninsula), Tabasco and Eastern Chiapas, in most part of Guatemala and in some regions of Belize and Honduras, a Meso-American area. (Editorial Note).

2A Mexican native people living in the States of Chiapas, Oaxaca and Tabasco. (Editorial Note).

3Passage of the ritual discourse by José Jiménez Historia and Manuel Jiménez Moreno, published in Nichimal k’op ta k’in tajimoltik – La palabra florida del carnaval, pp. 112-113.

4Last month of the agricultural or solar calendar in the Mayan world view. This calendar, known as Ab, is made up of 18 months of 20 days each, totaling 360 days. The year (365 days) is completed with the Wayeb, a five-day month devoted to reflection, showing gratitude, penitence, fasting, invocations, etc. (Editorial Note).

5Published in Quehacer Científico en Chiapas, pp. 10-11.