

**COMMUNALIZATION, CULTURAL HYBRIDIZATION, AND  
ETHNOGENESIS:  
bilingual teachers as new social actors  
in an ethno-regionalist movement in Mexico**

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The "ethnic revival" perceived during the last decade in different indigenous regions of Latin America implies the appearance of new social and political actors. On the local, regional and national level, indigenous organizations are arising - frequently as merely guild-like associations promoted by the nascent "indigenous intellectual elite": bilingual teachers educated by the governmental indigenist institutions to serve as official counterpart and "acculturation agent" of the nation-state in the indigenous regions. These emerging subjects, however, who are bilingual and culturally hybrid, nowadays start to "emancipate" from their institutional tutelage and turn into politically influential representatives of whole regions, establishing themselves as an innovative political factor (Urban & Sherzer 1994, Santana 1995). In the present contribution, based on a case study of a Mexican

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indigenous region, the role played by the bilingual teachers in the appearance and consolidation of these new indigenous organizations is analyzed.

### ***The Setting: Indigenous Movements in Mexico***

The process of "emancipation" undergone by the agents of acculturation constitutes a turning point in the history of indigenous movements in Mexico. Two different forms of organization have been prevailing in nearly every indigenous region until the eighties. On the one hand, the bilingual teachers, trained in the context of *indigenismo* politics, and the indigenous civil servants who gained positions inside the indigenist institutions create their own pressure groups such as the *Consejo Nacional de Pueblos Indígenas* (CNPI) and the *Alianza de Profesionales Indígenas Bilingües, A.C.* (APIBAC). Even though these lobby groups of emerging indigenous intellectuals achieve considerable influence mainly inside the Mexican government's educational and cultural politics, their representativity in their own communities of origin remains very limited (Mejía Piñeros & Sarmiento Silva 1991).

On the other hand, and apart from these lobby associations, regional and national peasant organizations arise as a response to the gradual retreat of the state from the rural areas. Forged around leaders of urban origin, these *campesino* organizations specialize in the canalization of claims for agrarian reform and agricultural development (Reitmeier 1990). Despite their often revolutionary programme, in their day-to-day practice these organizations heavily depend on the benevolence of the governmental institutions, because if their mass mobilizations fail in their claims, the peasant leaders will quickly lose their mainly indigenous members.

Throughout the eighties, and particularly since the beginning of the nineties, both types of organizations are suffering a serious crisis. For both of them, the official recognition of *indigenismo*'s failure as a means of ethnically

homogenizing the rural populations as well as the retreat of the neoliberal state from its agrarian reform and agriculture politics means that they lose their institutional counterpart. Consistently, they also have to face an increasing questioning of their legitimacy and *raison d'être* by their grassroots membership. In this context, the teacher associations as well as the "classical" peasant organizations will be marginalized by the emergence of a new organizational type: "alliances of convenience" and "coalitions" of different indigenous communities appear since the end of the eighties, who declare themselves as "sovereigns" in front of governmental institutions, who claim recognition for their consuetudinary law - the local *costumbre* - and who combine their political struggles aimed at communal and regional autonomy with self-managed development projects <sup>2</sup>.

***For example, the Purhépecha***

Starting with the first pilote-projects implemented in the thirties by the Lázaro Cárdenas administration (1934-1940), the Purhépecha region in the western Mexican state of Michoacán turns into a model zone for Mexican *indigenismo* politics and projects, whose consequences are thus all the more illustrative. At the same time, together with Chiapas, Oaxaca and Guerrero, for the last twenty years the region has continuously been stimulating indigenous movements. Therefore, the emergence of new forms of ethno-communalist organization as well as their specific conception of local and communal development projects will be studied in the Purhépecha region.

The Purhépecha, also known as *Tarascos* in the literature, live on a woody volcanic plateau, whose mainly communally-owned lands are divided into

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<sup>2</sup> A detailed analysis of the Mexican indigenous organizations which includes their historical and political frame is offered in Dietz (1996).

plots cultivated by family units. They combine the growing of maize, kidney beans and other vegetables with small-scale stockbreeding, forestry and fishery in Lake Pátzcuaro. Furthermore, in each of the village communities a wide range of diversified and locally specialized handicrafts are produced; pottery, woodwork, copper products and textiles are exchanged or sold on regional markets.

### ***The heritage of indigenismo***

The development projects carried out in the Purhépecha region since the thirties form part of the governmental policy of *indigenismo*<sup>3</sup>. This strategy of "mexicanizing the indio" (Lázaro Cárdenas) is implemented by the *Instituto Nacional Indigenista* (INI), which pursues two mutually interwoven aims:

- the social and cultural integration of the indigenous population into Mexican society by means of a "planned acculturation" aimed at achieving ethnic homogeneity, on the one hand;
- and the "modernization" of the local and regional indigenous economy through its forced opening towards national and international markets, on the other hand.

In the studied regions, as well as in other indigenous zones in Mexico, *indigenismo* has failed in both aspects. Instead of promoting *métissage* through free access to education, the educational politics has profoundly divided the local population into two different groups. Thanks to their own financial resources or to funds obtained from INI, a small minority actually succeeds in attending an intermediate or even a high school in the provincial cities located outside the Purhépecha region; this privileged group hardly

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<sup>3</sup> A presentation and discussion of the different *indigenismo* programmes and projects carried out in Michoacán is included in Dietz (1995).

ever returns to their villages. On the other hand, the huge majority of the regional population, who only finishes or abandons primary school, remains in the village and goes on practicing their traditional peasant and craftsman activities: what they have learnt at school is not suitable at all for their daily life in the village. Therefore, whereas some Purhépecha are individually "acculturated" and emigrate to the large urban sprawls, thus deepening the problem of rural exodus, most of the Purhépecha acquire certain skills which are important when dealing with *mestizo* society - such as reading and writing as well as basic calculus -; nevertheless, the access to these skills does no influence their ethnic identity (Valentinez Bernabé 1982).

*Indigenismo* also fails in its economic politics of "opening" the villages in an attempt to "proletarize" the Purhépecha peasant units. Without any exception, each of the "ccoperatives" and production-schools established in the region end up collapsing as a result of the local population's unwillingness to participate. Some of these production-schools, such as the guitar factory in Paracho and the pottery plants in Tzintzuntzan and Capula, are transformed by their former directors into private enterprises, who employ very few impoverished peasants as occasional unskilled workers. In the agricultural as well as in the handicraft sector, the peasant family enterprise remains as the prevailing type of labour organization (Engelbrecht 1987, Linck 1988).

The infrastructural integration of the region, pursued by the construction of roads, electrification and the proliferation of artesian wells for drinking water has not succeeded, either. Instead of promoting the establishment of private enterprises from outside the region, the improvement of traffic in the region has caused two highly negative side-effects (Alvarez-Icaza et al. 1993, Piñar Alvarez 1994):

- the rapid deforestation of the communal woods, unleashed by the national timber industry's high demands of ever more raw materials;
- and the overflowing of the local markets by large amounts of cheap, industrially produced commodity, which increasingly marginalizes the region's own craft and agricultural products.

### ***The bilingual teachers as new cultural intermediaries***

Since the beginning of *indigenismo*, the nation-state perceives the necessity of relying on a specifically trained group of "culture promoters" and bilingual teachers who originate from the region and who will be in charge of carrying out the different literacy campaigns. These "promoters" of national mestizo culture will fulfill a double task: the bilingual teacher is not only appointed for nursery and primary education, but he will also have to accomplish diverse out-of-school activities in the domain of adult education and community development (Aguirre Beltrán 1992).

This double feature of the bilingual teacher is present from the beginning of the teacher-training programmes developed since 1935 in the first *Internado Indígena*, located in Paracho in the heart of the Purhépecha high plateau. This model boarding-school has been training consecutive generations of young Purhépecha recruited from nearby their communities, who thus maintain their local ties and, at the same time, are educated in a *mestizo* school environment. In order to train them in their double tasks as teachers as well as community developers, academic teacher-training courses are combined with "production workshops" designed to promote the industrialization of peasant agriculture and of the local handicrafts. The boarding-schools graduates are supposed to apply these skills as "culture promoters" employed by the INI to carry out the above mentioned educational, economic and infrastructural development projects.

Already during the seventies, however, the failure of the Purhépecha teachers in accomplishing both tasks turns evident. In the school context, the allegedly bilingual character of the nursery and primary education frequently turns out to be fictitious. The purhé language is hardly ever really taught or used at school; this is a result of the complete inexistence of appropriate didactical material, but it is also a consequence of the parents' - and often even the teachers' - resistance or lack of interest towards the indigenous language. The main reason for the general absence of purhé from school, however, consists in the shortcomings of the bilingual teachers' training; as the indigenous language is only conceived of as a temporary and rather mechanical tool for achieving final hispanization, the young and unexperienced teachers cannot cope with locally and regionally rather different and complex situations of bilingualism and diglossia (Ros Romero 1981).

On the other hand, the teachers' contribution to community development also proves highly unsatisfactory for the *indigenismo* institutions. With an average age of sixteen to twenty-two, a short and superficial training and an own instruction level which rarely reaches the secondary school, the teachers frequently raise the local populations' and particularly the traditional village authorities' active resistance. As most of the young teachers are not employed in their home villages, but in distant communities belonging to a different dialect zone or even to a different indigenous language, the newly arrived teacher or "culture promotor" is perceived as just one more intruder sent by the *indigenismo* agencies.

### ***Struggling for a bilingual and bicultural education***

As an official reaction to the bleak scenery of failures and to the increasing criticism expressed by the communities as well as by the teachers who feel dissatisfied with their role as agents of acculturation, in 1979 the Ministry of

Education reorganizes its activities in indigenous regions updating its teacher-training and primary school curricula. Starting from this reform, an intimate and fruitful collaboration emerges between the Ministry and the mentioned bilingual teachers' lobby organization, APIBAC. The offspring of this convergence of interests is an alternative programme of "bilingual and bicultural education", elaborated by several teachers committed to abolishing the instrumental use of bilingualism to hispanize the children by developing a genuinely bicultural curriculum (Gabriel Hernández 1981). As this process of "biculturalizing" all subjects taught in nursery and primary schools in indigenous regions requires an active and permanent participation of highly prepared bicultural actors, at the beginning of the eighties the Ministry is forced to open its internal hierarchies to an increasing number of teachers and academics of indigenous origin.

Even if the official introduction of the bilingual and bicultural type of education proposed by APIBAC is rightly considered to be a crucial achievement of the newly emerged "indigenous intellectuals" working inside the Ministry of Education, its real functioning *in situ*, as empirically analyzed in the Purhépecha region, still reflects the same shortcomings of its monocultural *mestizo* predecessor: a brief, superficial and inadequate training of the bilingual teachers, a lack of didactic materials and infrastructural support, a clientelistic politics of allocating the teachers to regions and communities which only reflects the interests of the Mexican teachers' monopolistic trade union dominated by the state-party and, as a result of these factors, an increasingly controversial role the bilingual teachers plays inside his community.

In this context, the Purhépecha teacher, facing a diversity of highly complex and heterogeneous tasks, in his daily work is actually reduced to "a transmitter of some basic knowledge of national education, a handbook technician of the indigenous language and a manager of material services for



the community" <sup>4</sup>. Overburdened with such different functions of educational, cultural and economic intermediation (Vargas 1994), many of the interviewed bilingual teachers additionally perceive a profound conflict of loyalty: as open confrontations between the *indigenismo* institutions and their local beneficiaries spread across the region, in the course of his daily work as a kind of cultural translator and hybridizer, the Purhépecha teacher ends up mediating between two antagonistic parties.

### ***Recommunalization and cultural hybridization***

The obvious failure of *indigenismo*'s aim of ethnical homogeneization and economic modernization forces the administration of Miguel de la Madrid (1982-1988) to definitively abandon the integrationist approach towards the indigenous population of Mexico. The Mexican nation-state, since the oil crisis subjected to rigid structural adjustment politics and deeply indebted to the neoliberal paradigm, focusses its economic politics on the promotion of the "productive" sectors and regions. Consequently, from now on the indigenous population scarcely obtains some minimal measures of social assistance, which are no longer aimed at fostering real participation or economic integration, but whose only goal consists in limiting the explosive and subversive force of rural poverty.

In this global context of a generalized retreat of the state, the new indigenous intellectual elite loses its slowly conquered spheres of influence inside the governmental politics of *indigenismo* and its educational and cultural programmes. As the *indigenismo* approach itself is increasingly marginalized by the global course of the neoliberally oriented Mexican politics, a growing number of bilingual teachers, "culture promoters", civil

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<sup>4</sup> Calvo Pontón & Donnadieu Aguado (1992:172); the translation is mine.

servants and trade unionists, politically and ideologically start to desert from the *mestizo* project of the nation-state, whose ideology of *métissage* they always had been publically defending as general framework of their *indigenismo* projects. Thus, throughout the eighties a new group of indigenous dissidents arise, who cancel their loyalty to the official national project and who consciously reintegrate into their communities of origin.

Despite the tensions created by the intrusion of external agents of development inside the Purhépecha community in the course of the former *indigenismo* programmes, until now the communal structure has successfully been maintained as the central point of reference of the Purhépechas' daily life <sup>5</sup>. The nuclear family still constitutes the main unit of production, while the village community remains the central level of organization that shapes its inhabitants' principal economic, social, religious and political activities. Due to one's social status as *comunero*, as a member of the community, acquired by birth or by marriage, the individual not only gains access to communal lands, but he also becomes an integral part of the social and political unit of the community. According to consuetudinary law, the totality of the *comuneros* determines the village's political life: the communal assembly, in which traditionally only married males enjoy the right to speak and/or to vote, distributes the *cargos*, the local posts and offices. Nowadays, these ranks and posts, which frequently imply important amounts of personal spendings, comprise both the still surviving *cargos* of the civil-religious hierarchy intimately associated with the cult of the local patron saint, and the new administrative offices, introduced in the course of the twentieth century by the nation-state, but re-appropriated by the local *cargo* "logic".

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<sup>5</sup> The following summary of the community's internal structure is based on my own ethnographic data, which have been contrasted and complemented by details contributed by Vázquez León (1992) and by Pavageau (1992).

The communal assembly, the local authorities designated by the assembly as well as the *acheecha* as "council of elders", a locally important institution of consultation and arbitration formed by those senior villagers who already have passed through each rank in the *cargo* hierarchy - all these communal institutions are now rediscovered, revitalized and refunctionalized by the formerly "lost generation" of the Purhépecha intellectuals who desert from *indigenismo* politics. Instead of continuing to struggle for posts, influence and recognition in the urban world, the educational elite returns from "high politics", and even those bilingual teachers who never completely left their villages, but who always have been committed to *mestizo* associations and movements such as trade unions, political parties, lobbies and interest groups, now will try to reintegrate themselves into the daily routine of local politics. Thus, many teachers and civil servants who for a long time have been abandoning or postponing their rights and duties as *comuneros*, once again start to participate in communal assemblies and to collaborate with their peasant neighbours holding local *cargos*, thereby expecting to strengthen their communities against the external political and institutional agents and, at the same time, to overcome the tensions and divisions provoked by these agents inside the Purhépecha villages.

The activities carried out by this newly "recommunalized" indigenous intelligentsia take two different forms. In some villages, the young teachers succeed in occupying the main *cargos*, whereas the elder peasant *comuneros* withdraw to the *acheecha* council; the subsequent divergences and tensions between both groups are dealt with in the communal assembly, where the older generation still enjoys considerable reputation and influence. In the large majority of Purhépecha villages, however, these initial confrontations result in an inter-generational division of work: while the traditional authorities, who are often recognized by their local neighbours as "natural leaders", maintain the control over the intralocal, domestic affairs, the

younger teachers, civil servants and students are invited to take advantage of their larger experiences in dealing with governmental institutions and bureaucratic administrations, dedicating themselves to the village's external relations. Thus, new informal *cargos* emerge to complement the older ones without necessarily defying their consuetudinary status inside the community.

Once the division of work between internal and external *cargos* is settled by defining and recognizing each one's competence, in practice the holders of the new and the old ranks and offices tend to collaborate intimately in their common goal to strengthen the community in its interior and to regain its independence from the outside agents. In order to achieve this goal, in many villages formerly central traditions of local life are recovered: the *faena* - compulsory collective work, particularly employed in public works on behalf of the village as a whole -, the redistribution of economic surplus by celebrating and financing communal *fiestas* and, finally, the consuetudinary principle of always respecting the equal participation of the different *barrios* <sup>6</sup> in any community affair - inside the communal assembly as well as in the distribution of local *cargos*.

These attempts to regain and revitalize ancient traditions, are complemented by introducing completely new elements of "western" origin. For example, a few years ago the teachers - many of whom are women or unmarried young man, thus lacking the *comunero* status - start struggling for enlarging the very concept of the *comunero*. Nowadays, in nearly every Purhépecha community have succeeded in extending the rights and duties of political participation to the female and unmarried population of the village.

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<sup>6</sup> These *barrios* are intralocal residence units into which every Purhépecha village is divided and whose members share a common, sublocal identity and - apart from the local patron saint - worship an own *barrio* saint.

Another internal transformation process initiated by the younger teachers affects the decision making mechanism prevailing in the communal assembly sessions. The consuetudinary principle of consensus, which in many villages successfully avoids intralocal polarizations along minority and majority votes and mitigates confrontations between "winners" and "losers", has the obvious disadvantage of all too frequently turning the assembly sessions into lengthy, tedious and unattractive events. Consequently, the teachers carry through an internal reform, according to which all minor issues are decided by the principle of voting and majority decisions, nearly always taken by acclamation. Nevertheless, all communal assembly keep the principle of consensus for those decisions which affects central aspects of community life and whose enforcement - for example, against reluctant external agents - thus will also require the participation of the whole village.

### ***Bilingual teachers and local self-determination***

Throughout the eighties, several Purhépecha communities abandon their passive role as mere recipients of externally conceived development projects. As resistance against governmental measures which are only of benefit for a tiny minority of the local population or for external intermediaries is growing in many villages, the local authorities feel the necessity of defining their communities' real priorities, of specifying their own project proposals and of elaborating the details of how to carry out and to finance them. In order to be able to cope with such a bureaucratic endeavour, the communal assemblies as well as their local authorities once again turn to the younger returnees.

Thus, in nearly every village the Purhépecha intelligentsia is entrusted with the task of writing down each of the development priorities fixed in the local assembly and of defining the specific measures to be taken. As these project proposals specify not only the requested external resources, but also the

resources contributed by the community itself through collective *faenas*, the assembly and the elected authorities will have to approve the whole project drafts before turning them to external development agencies.

As a result of this cyclic process, the community starts to closely and permanently participate in the global procedure of elaborating "its own" project. The success or failure of such a self-managed project depends on the intense and often difficult and tense collaboration which necessarily has to evolve between the communal *cargos*, the council of elders, the young teachers and/or agronomists. All these different local actors start to realize that the elaboration of their own projects is a much more laborious task than the habitual attitude of "waiting for the expert from the capital". Nevertheless, a variety of different experiences made with craft, forestry, educational and cultural projects in several Purhépecha villages <sup>7</sup> show that the community's intimate participation in a project's elaboration will decisively increase its eagerness for carrying out its project, even though the whole village should have to turn up in the state capital to exercise pressure on the concerned institution.

### ***The rise of an ethno-regional organization***

As the state and its development agencies are not willing to recognize the community as an independent agent of development, the village is forced to strengthen its negotiating position in front of its governmental counterparts. Thus, since the end of the eighties and beginning of the nineties, the

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<sup>7</sup> These self-managed projects of community development are analyzed by Dietz (1997),

Purhépecha communities are undertaking a process of regionalizing their level of organization in order to overcome their habitual political isolation <sup>8</sup>. The starting point for the emergence of a regional convergence of the communities' interests once again is formed by the local intellectuals, commissioned by their respective local assemblies to externally represent their villages and their projects. Bilingual teachers, agronomists, forestry experts and "culture promoters" from different Purhépecha villages start to regain old contacts inside trade unions, political parties and government institutions. Together with some experienced local authorities, due to their success in negotiating with external agencies regionally recognized as "natural leaders", the returnees build up an informal network of relations which at the beginning are purely personal, but which later on lead into the establishment of a "coalition" of the different communities' shared interests. Along the periodic assemblies held on a regional level, the local authorities and their respective external affairs representatives join the nascent network, exchange their main problems and claims, and discuss possible solutions.

These regional assemblies, held by turns in different villages, proceed in a ritualized and diplomatic, although often tense way. Above all in the central plateau region, ancient conflicts over the boundaries of communal lands persist, which originate from colonial land titles that contain mutually overlapping boundary demarcations. Consequently, during the regional sessions the generation of younger teachers tries to emphasize the region's common features beyond local particularities, whereas the older *cargos* tend to highlight their localism and their differences from neighbouring villages. As a compromise, in this first phase of the regional network, the assemblies

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<sup>8</sup> The following analysis of the rise and consolidation of an ethno-regional movement is based on ethnographic data as well as on unpublished archive records of the emerging Purhépecha organization.

limit themselves to formulate shared preoccupations and claims *vis-à-vis* the external agents - government bureaucracies, development agencies and non-governmental organizations.

### ***"Ireta P'orhecha / Nación Purhépecha"***

In 1991 and 1992, the coincidence of three different factors accelerate the "ethnic revival" in the whole Purhépecha region:

- In the first place, the local population's interest and participation in elections - since the obviously fraudulent results of the 1988 presidential election shifted from the national to the municipal sphere - is generally perceived as disappointing; despite of the returnees' insistence on the necessity of voting and expressing dissidence through polls, an increasing number of their peasant neighbours are deeply concerned about the resulting internal polarization of the community. As a consequence of the spread of violence after the 1991 municipal elections, the Purhépecha massively abandon party politics as a channel of participation.
- On the other hand, the returned Purhépecha intellectuals will actively participate in the controversial debate which arises even before 1992 in the context of the Quincentennial festivities on the multiethnic composition of Mexico and its indigenous peoples' right to claim an "ethnic and cultural difference". Highly aware of their public impact on a national level, these intellectuals painstakingly elaborate a new ethno-regional discourse aimed at overcoming the traditionally localist limits of the Purhépecha's identity horizon.
- It is, however, not this new elite discourse, but a third political factor which will succeed in mobilizing even the traditionalist councils of elders beyond the ancient, paralyzing conflicts between communities over land: the decision taken by the Salinas de Gortari administration to modify the Mexican Constitution's article 27, thereby canceling the agrarian reform process and promoting the individualization and privatization of communal land tenure. Even before the constitutional reform takes effect, at the end of 1991 the external affairs representatives of the Purhépecha villages summon a massively attended regional assembly of all communities, where



the decision is taken to defend by all means the communal land tenure against the nation-state's intrusion in the communities' consuetudinary sovereignty.

The resulting manifesto, the *Decreto de la Nación Purhépecha*, signed by the local authorities of the whole region, is retrospectively interpreted as the founding moment of a new, ethno-regional organization, called *Ireta P'orhecha / Nación Purhépecha*. This new type of organization rises from an informal coalition of communities that declare themselves to be sovereign in front of a nation-state which dares to defy the consuetudinary essence of the community's self-definition. As the communal sovereignty remains unassailable by the regional organization, *Nación Purhépecha* still is considered to be merely an intercommunal alliance, which is not allowed to create centralized agencies beyond the regional assembly of local representatives and its ad hoc-commissions of delegations appointed by the assembly. The rotating and decentralized type of organization is chosen to avoid the consolidation of internal hierarchies and executive staff, easily cooptable and/or repressable by government institutions, as past experiences with formerly independent peasant and indigenous organizations have shown. Besides, the permanent rotation of ranks and assembly locations aims at promoting and strengthening a comprehensive Purhépecha identity that overcomes the limits of the still strong communal identities.

The regional organization suffers from the same problem as its member communities: it lacks an officially recognized legal status. Accordingly, its range of activities comprises two different spheres. On the one hand, it continues to function as a regional catalyst of local problems and claims. The assemblies held every week or fortnight in different villages gather a large variety of local claims - the enlargement of a primary school, the drilling of a well for drinking water, the extension of electricity, the recognition of

communal boundaries etc. - and present them as a common catalogue to the institutions concerned with each of the claims.

The obvious advantage of this procedure consists in the collective capacity of a whole region and not only a single community of reacting against the usual governmental and bureaucratic negligence or unwillingness to solve the local problems. In order to put pressure on the responsible agencies, the regional assembly's measures include massive "visits" of the concerned institution's headquarters, press conferences and rallies in the state capital Morelia, as well as blockades of vital roads surrounding the Purhépecha region. It is owing to this explicitly political practice that the younger bilingual teachers have succeeded in stimulating a new attitude among their neighbours: instead of submissively asking the government to help them, now they start claiming rights they have as Mexican citizens *vis-à-vis* "their" nation-state. The formerly "poor indians" are becoming self-conscious citizens struggling for their legitimate minimal demands.

Apart from jointly requesting governmental development initiatives, in the last few years a new terrain of collective action is emerging. As the majority of agencies tend to retreat from rural development or limit their activities to the distribution of financial resources without carrying out any project of their own, *Nación Purhépecha* is forced by its member communities to expand its range of actions to the elaboration of projects and the search for financial support. The communal assemblies and authorities prefer to pass on these new tasks to the regional assembly and its specialized commissions in order to take advantage of the range of the required professional and technical know-how existing in the region as a whole and not only in their own village. Thus, the regional organizations is transformed into a new and influential agent of development, currently carrying out projects such as the establishment of a supralocal craft training and trading centre, the creation

of a bilingual and bicultural highschool for agroforestry and the promotion and recovery of family-based subsistence maize agriculture <sup>9</sup>.

### ***Towards regional autonomy***

Apart from their economic and social impact, these pioneer regional projects, which are jointly self-managed by representatives of different Purhépecha villages, are above all politically important. Since *Nación Purhépecha* no longer confines itself to the articulation of specific demands directed towards the state, the coalition of communities is implementing its own development project, thus rising as an innovative political factor in the whole of Michoacán. Consequently, the state government first tries to counteract the potentially new power focus. However, as its possibilities of recovering its fading protagonism in rural development are limited by the prevailing neoliberal strategy, after massive mobilizations carried out throughout 1993 and 1994, the Michoacán government finally is forced to recognize the Purhépecha organization at least as an informal, but legitimate counterpart and negotiator of the local population.

Currently, the regional coalition is striving for its official recognition by the state agencies and a legal status, which would not only entitle them to obtain governmental as well as non-governmental financial support ofr its projects, but also would imply access to the few, but important channels of participation inside *indigenismo* agencies and other state-run institutions. In the long run, this process of consolidation is supposed to result in the establishment of a new, intermediate level of regional administration, situated above the municipal government and bellow the state. This regional council of self-administration formed by all Purhépecha communities would,

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<sup>9</sup> These projects are detailed in Dietz (1997).

however, require a constitutional reform, as the political project of autonomy aims at explicitly legalizing two de facto already existing actors:

- the indigenous community, on the one hand, whose consuetudinary structure still is not constitutionally recognized, but remains subject to the - mostly mestizo-controlled - municipal government;
- and the supra-municipal level of a regional assembly of communities, on the other hand, a phenomenon which is not exclusive to the Purhépecha, but which also appears in other Mexican states.

These regional coalitions emerge since 1992 in different indigenous zones of Mexico. Nevertheless, the subsequent debate on regional territorial autonomy and on the necessary constitutional reforms is definitely enforced by the appearance of an armed movement in Chiapas in 1994, the *Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (EZLN). According to the position of *Nación Purhépecha* as well as of other regional coalitions, the regional autonomy also adopted by the EZLN as one of its core claims would not mean a territorial segregation, but a redefinition of the Mexican nation-state and its relation towards the indigenous communities. In several of the local regional assemblies attended in the Purhépecha region, nearly all local authorities warned their younger fellows, the external affairs representatives, that autonomy necessarily starts on the communal level and that a future process of regionalizing local autonomy must not exempt the nation-state from its development obligations in the indigenous regions.

### ***Hybridization and ethnogenesis***

The regionally conceived self-managed projects implemented both by the villages and by *Nación Purhépecha* emerge in the political context of the ongoing debates on the status of the indigenous community and on regional autonomy. Even if an economic, social or ecological evaluation of these projects still seems premature, its political impact is already evident. The

"alliance of interests" forged between the reintegrated Purhépecha intellectuals, originally promoted by *indigenismo* institutions, on the one hand, and the traditional local authorities, which have always been marginalized by the same institutions, on the other hand, has already succeeded in revitalizing and re-inventing the community. In this process, the bilingual teachers' main contribution consists in recovering communal traditions of reciprocity, self-arrangement and local sovereignty. Nevertheless, the same actors, trained in a culturally distant, urban world, but refunctionalized by their peasant neighbours, have also consciously promoted exogenous cultural innovations of local life in the village. As a result, these "cultural translators" are decolonizing themselves, abandoning the integrationist approach of *indigenismo*, but at the same time they are taking advantage of their hybrid cultural legacy, thus subverting the nation-state's original project. The "modernized", hybrid product of this re-encounter between bilingual teachers and subsistence peasants is the contemporary Purhépecha community, a new political subject which is decisively speeding up the democratization of the Mexican countryside, still deeply shaped by the clientelistic and authoritarian structures of the dominant political hierarchies.

The transition from local to regional activities and mobilizations, which is currently taking place, illustrates an important turning-point, as the innovative political and developmental practices initiated on the regional level will leave behind the historical isolation of the indigenous community. In this context, new organizations such as *Nación Purhépecha* are achieving a double integration of "tradition" and "modernity": on the one hand, by reducing ancient intercommunal conflicts over boundaries and consciously promoting an ethno-regional identity beyond the local particularities, the regional organization manages to integrate the rural population on a regional level. Moreover, on the other hand, the village coalition's political activities,

particularly its insistence on the nation-state's accountability and responsibility towards its indigenous citizens and its struggle for establishing regional councils of self-government, succeeds in strengthening the Purhépecha's participation in national affairs as Mexican citizens. Hence, its is paradoxically an independent and overtly dissident ethno-regional organization that just achieves what *indigenismo* supposedly has been aiming at during the last fifty years of exogeneous development: an equal participation and integration of the indigenous communities and their inhabitants not only into the nation-state, now itself redefined as a pluricultural hybrid, but likewise into the multiethnic Mexican society.

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