

Aldo Gonzalez is an indigenous person from the Mexican state of Oaxaca, where community organisations are leading a major resistance movement against the contamination of native maize by transgenic seeds. The movement is guided by the ancestral relationships between people and their natural surroundings. Politically, the resistance movement is linked to the struggle for autonomy by and for local communities, and is rooted in a particular indigenous vision of the world. In Oaxaca and in other Mexican states, defending maize is a cornerstone of defending a community's autonomy.

Territory, autonomy and defending maize



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Biodiversidad: Tell us about the Oaxaca region and what it means to be Zapoteca in addition to being Mexican.

Aldo: The Zapoteca people are more admired today for what they once were rather than what they are now, because in the central valleys of Oaxaca there are many impressive pyramids that evoke the remote past of the Zapoteca people. But we Zapotecas are still alive in many Oaxaca communities, and our culture is expressed in many ways. Oaxaca is one of the country's richest States in cultural – as well as biological – diversity. There is a great diversity of climates, plants and animals which can only exist because of the cultural diversity. One of those cultures is our Zapoteca culture. We Zapotecas live in different micro-regions and we speak 17 different dialects.

When I visit different places, the first thing I like to do is to taste the food. When I arrived in Uruguay I asked what people eat here, to get to know the flavour of the place, and they told me people eat beef. I have also danced some of the music here. This is always an attraction, when you come in and taste the flavors and enjoy the culture and the way people have fun. In Oaxaca, our main dishes are made with maize. We eat *tortillas* every day, but always with different things. For example, in Oaxaca you can go to the market and eat *chapulines*, which are like grasshoppers, but smaller. They taste good and are full of protein. Probably in the future big transnationals will want to feed us insects, but we won't let them patent the *chapulines* because this is very much our food. Depending on where they live, Zapotecas prepare different dishes with maize, they make *tortillas*, *tamales*¹, *pozole*², *atole*³ and

¹ Tamales consist of seasoned chopped meats or vegetables enclosed in masa (maize dough) and wrapped in a softened maize husk. The savory packages are steamed and the maize husks are peeled away before eating.

² Maize and pork soup

³ A warm, porridge-like drink made thick with masa (maize dough).

many regional specialities. The typical food along the coast is maize with iguanas or with shrimp.

But of course the Zapoteca culture is not just food, although this is something that outsiders like very much in the Zapoteca culture. Our villages also have their own forms of organisation, which have not been respected by the Mexican state. Most of our communities hold their land communally, and all of us who live in a community feel something like ownership over the legally-held land which has been recognised by the Mexican government as belonging to that community. But we believe that instead of splitting the land into individual plots, we should build larger territorial spaces covering more communities. We don't want to move towards individualism; we want to build bigger and bigger collective territories.

In each territorial space, the resistance arises from the communities. We have our own governments with relative autonomy – “relative” because there are always pressures to implement programmes mandated by Mexico's federal or state governments. The government of Oaxaca has even recognised our right to elect our authorities without the intervention of political parties, which is recognition not of us but of our peoples' cultural heritage. So we do have our own forms of organisation, we have our own means of electing our leaders and we have been putting them into practice. Today the Mexican state has no choice but to recognise the existence of these differences. We work collectively and when the whole community is needed, our authorities are able to summon us all to make our physical contribution to work for the common good.

It's not all work though; we also have festivals. Visitors say, “These Oaxaca people are real partiers,” because there are many festivals. Every community – there are about 10,000 in all – has at least one festival per year, but they are on different dates, so it looks from the outside like Oaxaca has festivals every day. These festivals are our space for sharing, a space for being together with our brothers and sisters, and also with all the people who visit us.

How did your communities become concerned about biopiracy?

The problems began with the bioprospecting contract signed by the defunct Sandoz company – which became Novartis and then Syngenta – with certain communities that belong to the Union of Zapoteca Chinanteca Communities, aided by the Rural Studies and Peasant Consultants. We found

problems with the agreement. We said then that no community could claim ownership over the natural resources on offer to be carried away to Switzerland, because of the arbitrary lines drawn to demarcate the place of origin of the plants and animals in question. The decision to sign the bioprospecting agreement was taken by only four communities and was not discussed thoroughly enough to make that kind of decision.

Was it simply a matter of not involving enough communities in the decision, or are there other issues at stake too?

I believe that no single community – or two, three or four communities – can decide for themselves whether to offer certain resources, because they do not own them. Indigenous peoples are stewards of the diversity of living beings and also of beings we can't even see, which are supernatural and who live in our forests and in our communities. We must respect both nature and these other beings, otherwise we are granting ourselves a right that isn't really ours. No one can say they own diversity.

No one can say “I'll sell you this because it is on communal land the Mexican government has recognised for me.” Taking that kind of decision necessarily means that all the communities of the

Aldo Gonzalez is a Zapotec indigenous and community leader from Guelatao in the Sierra Juarez mountain range of northern Oaxaca, Mexico. Aldo is director of UNOSJO, a grassroots campesino organisation in the Sierra Juarez. UNOSJO provides technical assistance and consultation to small farmers with the goal of promoting sustainable rural economies that are based on respect for indigenous culture. It plays a vital role in educating local communities and collaborating with national and international organisations about the threat of GM maize.

“We are heirs to a great treasure that is not measured in money and that they want to take away from us. This is no time to beg for alms from the aggressor. Every Indian and every peasant knows about the transgenic contamination of our maize and we proudly declare: I plant and will continue to plant the seeds that our grandparents bequeathed to us, and I will assure that my children, their children and the children of their children continue to grow them. I will not allow them to kill the maize, because our maize will only die the day the sun dies.”





Festivals and celebrations are as important today for Mexico's indigenous people as they were for their Aztec ancestors

Sierra Juarez have to be informed and enabled to decide, either for or against. But it has to be *all* the communities. For us, that means there has to be some other kind of government. We cannot sit back and wait for the federal government or the Oaxaca State government to decide. It has to be a regional government, an autonomous government of the indigenous communities. But this kind of government doesn't exist and the federal government doesn't want it to exist. Today, we are fighting to exercise the rights of the Zapoteca people to self determination, for autonomous authority within the Mexican state.

As a result, our communities would have the right to decide on what kind of development – if we can call it that – our communities want to achieve. There is no need for transnational corporations or government programs to tell us which resources they need from our communities, but rather we should be able to decide for ourselves how and what we will use, as well as what we do not wish to use, and knowing full well why not.

How do these concerns tie in with the contamination with transgenic maize in Mexico?

We never imagined that communities surrounded by mountains, out of touch with modern technology, would be contaminated by transgenic plants – especially since transgenic plants have been on the planet for less than ten years. We felt deeply hurt by this because maize is sacred for us – it is the foundation for the resistance of indigenous peoples. If we had no maize we could not exist; we are made of maize, we depend on it as it depends on us. We complement each other: neither can exist alone, which is why this contamination hurts *us*.

We don't want to eat or plant just any old maize. In some communities people have planted hybrid maize, which may have higher yields of up to eight tons per hectare, but we feel that our native maize varieties – even when we harvest just one ton per hectare – are more satisfying and superior to other kinds of maize. Our communities may not have the biggest harvests, but it is enough to last a whole year, meaning we'll have enough to eat and no worries. Native maize varieties hold up to the bad storms that our communities experience, but the hybrid and transgenic maize can't last a whole year. Some communities have harvested up to eight tons of hybrid maize per hectare, but three months later the kernels have all turned to dust. That maize is designed to be sold, while our communities' maize is for us to eat, and to last long enough for us to be able to eat it.

We have no interest in hybrid and transgenic seeds because they have nothing to do with our culture. They were made to be sold, and our maize is not for sale.

How are other indigenous communities responding to the contamination of maize?

Transgenic contamination has occurred in eight Mexican States, and there is growing concern, particularly amongst indigenous peoples. We have held various ceremonies to defend maize, including holding traditional rites together with indigenous brothers and sisters in many Mexican villages. It's not that we have simply agreed to work together: the maize itself is asking us to do something. We are making offerings of maize to our Mother Earth, and offerings to the fire as well, so they will help us defend our maize.

We believe that decontaminating our maize requires more than it just showing up negative in a laboratory test. The problem of contamination is taking our indigenous peoples back to our roots, because we know that the cure our peoples will provide for this problem will come out of our culture, of our people's ancestral knowledge about maize.

You say there is a difference between maize made for sale and the maize made or adapted from nature for a very specific culture, which is the same culture for which you are now demanding autonomy from the Mexican state.

This will be a long struggle for us. The timing of governments and transnational corporations are not the same as the timing of indigenous peoples.



We believe the time has come for our peoples to start building organisations which not only ensure survival but also achieve higher goals for this planet, in harmony with nature. The day is coming when our communities will begin making their own way down a different path.

But this path also has a different time frame. We have committed to building autonomy and we shall achieve it, no matter how much time we have to spend for this to happen. It may be ten years, twenty or even a whole century, but the decision has been made by our peoples and when our communities and our villages make this kind of decisions, they are decisions that must be carried out. I think it will be easier to put an end to capitalism than to put an end to the existence of Mexico's indigenous peoples.

How does this history of resistance and building autonomy come together in the context of trade liberalisation, particularly the North American Free Trade Agreement?

The Zapotecas in the State of Oaxaca are facing very serious problems. The economic situation for our communities has driven many young people to migrate, mainly to the United States, looking

for money to buy things, to build their homes. This is breaking down our communities' form of organisation, as many of those young people no longer pay attention to the elders, and because when they come back from the United States they bring new technologies and no longer want to work the land like people have always worked it. They believe that technology will solve the problems, but after a few years they realise that it may not be so.

I think that even though gaps have been opened through which many young people have left their communities, today people are coming back to the value of the traditional knowledge of our elders. It may have been neglected for many years, but now the need is clear for the knowledge of our communities' elders to be recovered and put into practice.

This interview was given to Carlos Santos in May 2004, when Aldo was participating in the seminar on "Food Sovereignty and Biodiversity," in Montevideo, to mark Biodiversidad's tenth anniversary. Biodiversidad (www.grain.org/biodiversidad) is GRAIN's sister magazine. It is published in Spanish and has a Latin American focus.

