SHARING VIDEO AS A CULTURAL AND RESEARCH TOOL: *VIDEOASTAS INDÍGENAS* IN CHIAPAS (MEXICO)

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INTRODUCTION: THE PVIFS

In this paper I present some of my reflections related to the experience of ***Proyecto Videoastas Indígenas de la Frontera Sur***[2] (PVIFS) in Altos de Chiapas (South-Eastern Mexico). This project, born 10 years ago out of the initiative of two social anthropologists, has been stimulating videoproduction among indigenous organisations and, at the same time, has become a space for anthropological research.

The challenge of such an initiative lies on the will to find ways to encourage mutual engagement between researchers and their "others", or, their usual "objects of study". In this case, the core population of this project are mostly young men from an indigenous background who live in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the historic capital in the State of Chiapas that, in the last decades, has suffered a deep demographic change with the arrival of indigenous population from rural areas that settled in the surroundings of the city.

Most of these men, between the ages of 20-30, arrived from the villages during their childhood and were raised in an urban, multicultural environment. Their parents and grandparents often endured pasts of war, racism and expulsion, and were frequently discriminated for their indigenous status. These are some of the alleged reasons that explain why many of their children did not learn the indigenous language(s) of the family (basically *tseltal* or *tsotsil*[3]).

THE IMAGES OF INDIANS IN CHIAPAS AND MEXICO

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[2] *Indigenous Videomakers of the Southern Border Project.*
See http://sureste.ciesas.edu.mx/Proyectos/PVIFS/ingles/pvifs.html

[3] Indigenous languages of Mayan root.

Chiapas is a clear example of what Bengoa (2000) refers to as, an "indigenous emergency"[4], with a change of roles and images of the indigenous peoples within Latin American nations. This emergency is marked clearly by the "neozapatista"[5] uprising of 1994. According to the experience of the *videoastas*[6] I worked with, the perception of being indigenous in the city changed in the last decade, although the marginalising stereotypes still survive (the ones that relate indigenous peoples with laziness, dirtiness, alcoholism, primitivism, passivity, etc.).

These situations are reflected in their own lives, as they explain how they tried to hide their origins at school to avoid exclusion but that their way of speaking "castilla"[7], revealed them. At the same time, though, after 1994 they could show off their "indianity" (through language, dressing…), because in some contexts it was considered interesting or a sort of novelty, particularly after the arrival of foreign people (tourists, activists, researchers) and "fuereños" from the main urban centres of Mexico, predominantly Mexico City or Guadalajara. These "new faces" of San Cristóbal de las Casas were fascinated not only by the tourist attractions of the town, but also by the picturesque indigenous settings as well as for the indigenous-led rebellion of the Zapatistas.

The new "popular" image of indigenous peoples in Altos de Chiapas is intertwined with discourses of self-determination and self-representation that are growing in popularity within Mexico and Latin America (in the context of ¨indigenous emergency"). Organised indigenous peoples all over the continent are working to make their claims for land and cultural rights be heard. This effort is linked with the production of visual information regarding the current reality of the indigenous communities and organisations, and the alternatives that they propose.

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[4] Characterised by the "…existence of a new identity discourse, that is to say, a 're-invented indigenous culture'. It is a urban reading of the indigenous tradition, done by the indigenous peoples themselves, according to their interests and goals. That is why it is a discourse about ethnic identity deeply rooted in tradition, but with the capability of getting out of it and dialoguing with modernity." (BENGOA, 2000: 128).

[5] This term is used for some authors (for instance LEYVA and SONNLEITNER, 2000) referring to the movement led by Ejército Zapatista de Liberación Nacional in Chiapas that was made public in January 1st of 1994, against the government in Mexico.

[6] Local word to refer to videomakers.

[7] Spanish language according to Mayan people.

All these ingredients are mixed up into a **dialogue of images** played by all the actors[8]. Historically, indigenous peoples of Mexico have been represented visually through stereotypical images. From muralists such as Diego Rivera to classic Mexican films, the image of the "Indian" has been generalized and represented as a subject that aggregates the positive values of "pre-columbine" America (therefore, providing the nation with an honourable past) but, at the same time, as the Indians of today (pictured day after day in the mass media) who have not been able to adapt to modern times and are themselves considered responsible for their own marginalisation and represent the poor, illiterate rural population and the excluded migrant workers in the cities.

INDIGENOUS VIDEO

In the last decades, parallel to the political changes and identity reconfigurations briefly described above, a movement has evolved that has somewhat transformed these images. What I consider to be a movement is taking place, especially from the late 1990s, in several countries of Latin America (Bolivia, Brazil, Mexico, Ecuador…). The phenomenon of "**indigenous video**", thoroughly studied by authors such as Faye Ginsburg (in the case of Australian aborigines) and Terence Turner (with the *Kayapo* people of Brazil), has been growing and has even developed to a context of governmental support (in the case of countries like Bolivia) or big networks of production and diffusion (such as the periodic festivals organised by the Coordinadora LatinoAmericana de Cine y Comunicación de los Pueblos Indígenas - CLACPI[9]).

The story of indigenous audiovisual communication is linked in Chiapas, as in many other places, to that of popular media, especially of the popular radios used often by organisations conformed mainly by illiterate people that are misrepresented by the mainstream media. For this reason, the first experiences of indigenous videoproduction in Chiapas happened in the context of popular movements of peasants that used the audiovisual support with

[8] See, for examples, MUNTAÑOLA, 2004: 202

[9] Latin American Council of Cinema and Communication of the Indigenous Peoples. See http://www.clacpi.org/

educational, testimonial or historical purposes. This is the case of the videoproductions of *Xi'nich* (Comité de Defensa de la Libertad Indígena), *Red de Comunicadores Boca de Polen*[10] or *Promedios*[11] (Chiapas Media Project, linked to the communication areas of the Zapatista movement). In this milieu, the case *of Proyecto Videoastas Indígenas de la Frontera Sur* (PVIFS), which was the main context of my research, has the particular feature of having an academic facet.

VIDEOASTAS AS CULTURAL BROKERS

The ***videoastas***, or videoproducers, that are related to the PVIFS, are mostly young men that, in my opinion, play a special role as **cultural brokers** (Wolf, 1955; Michaels, 1987; Ginsburg, 1992) They, on one side, are in a position that allows them to receive information and influences from the original cultures of their families as well as from the urban *mestizo* society. They occupy a transitional place being the first generation that has been educated and raised in the city. This means that they have access to roles and posts that no one in their ethnic group had before. All these are the characteristics of young educated indigenous migrants. On top of it, they possess a kind of mediation power related to the representations. The *videoastas* have virtually unlimited access to the hegemonic media and, at the same time, they have an extra information entry by travelling to festivals and gatherings that put them in touch with various imaginaries of the "indigenous". Moreover they have the specific capability to generate images, in an individual or collective way, about "indianity". Even when some of them consider themselves *mestizos* (or prefer to avoid this question to prevent being labelled), they do work in productions about indigenous peoples. That is to say, they **play a key role in generating a discourse about what is to be an indigenous person nowadays** (the same that intellectuals, writers or musicians, could have).

The point is that these images of the indigenous reality arrive not only to their own communities or neighbours, but also to wider audiences (TV channels, festivals, academic spaces, NGOs,…). Hence, a specific image, according to their vision of indigenous reality, is broadcasted as an image

[10] See http://www.bocadepolen.org/
[11] See http://www.promediosmexico.org/

created “from within”[12]. The *videoastas* and their works are then situated between hegemonic messages (of racism, invisibilisation, folklorisation, charity…) about indigenous peoples, and the alternative messages generated by popular movements or organisations. Consequently, exploring ways of presenting themselves and their communities through processes of videomaking is a rich ethnographic experience that helps to make the dialogue of images and the construction of their identities more visible.

METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

In this research, centred in the role of *videoastas* and their productions (processes and products), I have given methodology a central importance, providing that the use of audiovisual tools provides a specific scenario for gathering, discussion and knowledge development among all participants. The research proposal unites three main aspects of visual anthropology: image as a research object, as a method and as a discourse. At the same time, it provides an arena to face the conflicts and questionings of ethnography that Jean Rouch brought to light in his works: all of those concerning the “*regards croisés*” of the ethnographer and her “others”, on which I will now expound.

Working with indigenous *videoastas* in Chiapas is an ethnographic challenge. The visual world in relation to representation and, as it is accepted in anthropology, to identity, is a wide and complex field for a beginning researcher. Furthermore, because indigenous people in Chiapas have had numerous negative experiences with researchers in the past (related to theft of intellectual property, disrespecting the use of their image or other unethical practices), they are perfectly aware of what an investigation implies. Hence they are quite cautious and frequently demand explanations, prohibit researchers to work on certain topics, and ask for results that are useful for their purposes. This makes the **collaborative approach** that the PVIFS use meaningful and necessary.

In my experience I tried to combine textual and audiovisual results that could be used for sharing and discussions with the *videoastas* as well as for my doctoral dissertation. In fact, having the video support in common helped a lot with our relationship and communication. Contrary to the belief that cameras

[12] In opposition to the stereotyping representations created by journalists or filmmakers.

alter and complicate relations between the researcher and the informants, having a camera helped me to approach the field of study and the social actors,

The terms of the collaboration were based on my offer to "help" in audiovisual or intellectual activities. In exchange, I would have the opportunity for participant observation, as well as to interview, film and take pictures (always with consent[13]). The film and photographs were shared when asked and I also provided transcripts of interviews to be revised by the interviewee. I was asked to help as an audio assistant in filming, as a copy editor for scripts and as a subtitle translator. They also requested various anthropologists of the group to provide training on how to research a topic and then organize an audiovisual report. In order to create an "intellectualised" discourse about themselves, I was also asked to join them in discussions. Their final results could then be presented in meetings or for international festivals.

In spite of the good intention of the project, the use of profuse audiovisual techniques and my own goals, we did not manage to reach a real collaboration in research, which was the original aim. Our collaboration occurred in terms of my participation in the activities that I was invited to and my support (technical, intellectual, academic…) when it was needed. On the other hand, I got the chance to accompany indigenous *videoastas* in several actions related to their audiovisual work, daily life or important events and, of course, carry on interviews, observations and discussions. Still, the *videoastas* did not really see much interest or usefulness in a shared anthropological research, that is, in a common creation of knowledge. This made me deeply curious about the meaning of collaborative ethnography, an approach posed by authors such as Lassiter (2005). How could mutual engagement be possible if the main subjects of the research were not interested in collaboration, rather only in support from anthropologists for very specific issues?

[13] Acquiring consent to register images in Chiapas is utterly important. Given the political situation of the area (which is considered to be in a state of war of "low-intensity"), images have strong political and juridical power. Moreover, indigenous peoples, especially in the city and its surroundings, are remarkably sensitive to the "stealing" of their images, after decades of visits of tourists and journalists that have taken photographs and have not asked permission nor given anything in exchange. Some sites and rituals are particularly protected, as with the Mayan-Christian church of the locality of *San Juan Chamula*.

I cannot provide an answer for this question. Even so, there are many interesting points of view from the collaborative approach. For instance those related to the ethical position of the researcher during the entire process (observation, systematisation of data, analysis, communication of conclusions, use of results…). This would mean being honest and transparent regarding one's objectives and professional opinions towards the social actors we work with. Also giving credit to those who provided information that, at the end of the day, constitutes the frame for our academic knowledge. This is an important consideration, in the event that the social actors desire to be publicly identified.

Despite of all this, what I consider to be one of the most important lessons of this research process is the usefulness of audiovisual technology in reinforcing the intentions of collaboration and exchange. Authors such as Piault (2002) have already described the virtues of cinema in ethnography. My intention here is to show how this is specified in the case of my research with indigenous *videoastas*.

AUDIOVISUAL TECHNIQUES FOR A SHARED ANTHROPOLOGY

Below I describe the characteristics of video documentation that, in my experience, helped making the research a process of participation and reciprocal enrichment.

First of all, the role of the researchers is clear and negotiated in the field when a camera enters the stage. By showing their research techniques, the ethnographers provide information to the group of what they are doing, so they also become an object of observation. Therefore, their attitudes and activities enter a process of negotiation of what can be done or not, under what conditions, etc. In our case, I was a foreigner with technical devices accompanying the work of the videomaker of a certain organisation or project. Everybody knew what I was doing and why.

Moreover, in my research, the use of videographic support helped me to witness open discussions about the contents and the adequacy of certain images to generate a collective visual message. In all cases my role was to share my perspectives as an "outsider".

Besides of all these, as has been largely discussed, visual language allows a quality of communication different to written language. The images of

my interviews and video documentation, and those of their work, allowed us to communicate easily, even though our origins, gender, culture and history, academic level, interests, were enormously different. As we already know, images are a format closer to the oral transmission of knowledge, and are profusely used in projects of intercultural communication and education. They also have the virtue of eliciting new meaning when reviewed by their actors or other people. Therefore, we could say that the process of creating an audiovisual ethnographic document can be participatory, providing a more open and rich explanation of the reality being explored. The results of the process can be shared, finding other finalities besides of the academic use (as an educational material, political weapon, juridical witness…).

And, as Jean Rouch (1995) posed it, this technical device can help to subvert the traditional research hierarchies that divide the "scientific" eye and that of the "informants". It can facilitate a "shared anthropology", revealing the dialogical process that lies under ethnographies. This way, the anthropologists do not need to talk about "them" (the other) and their social phenomena. Now "they" can talk about "us", providing that *we are* creating and sharing a cultural process[14], which is analysed at the same time. Therefore, the anthropologists that use audiovisual devices can be creating their field of study at the same time that they and their camera are participating in it as social actors.

The possibilities that audiovisual tools can provide to us as researchers are infinite and unexpected. Visual anthropology and ethnographic cinema have developed parallel to several twists and breaks of our discipline, manifesting the changes of paradigm in the ways of seeing, filming, and using results. We could then expect these technologies to help us in exploring new relationships in the field, and in finding successful solutions to the new challenges of ethnography.

[14] I am indebted to Dr. Axel Köhler for this reflection. My thanks go to him and Dr. Xochitl Leyva for their initiative and support to my research. Also to all the *videoastas* involved in PVIFS and other projects in Chiapas in Oaxaca who helped me understand the importance and meaning of video as a cultural and research tool.

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