Writing Culture in Chiapas: Anthropology and Mayan Cultural Revitalisation

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Abstract

The Highlands of Chiapas is an area widely known for the events of 1994 - the Zapatista uprising. Prior to this, it was an area known to the world largely as a result of the enormous volume of anthropological work carried out there throughout the 20th century. During the latter part of that century the increasing critiques of anthropology were the backdrop to the reclamation of indigenous identity, cultural revitalisation, and indigenous people asserting the right to represent themselves and participate in public life. This paper, based upon fieldwork carried out in 2001 towards my PhD (continuing), will explore the relationship between indigenous cultural revitalization, and the anthropological history of the region. In Chiapas, I find that while this movement has an ambiguous relationship with anthropology, entrenched anthropological concepts and the substantial anthropological heritage in the region continue to be important in informing the way many indigenous groups perceive themselves, represent themselves and participate in public life. Many indigenous Mayans now study anthropology and find the region’s anthropological heritage useful for advancing their interests. Others do not and find themselves inexorably ‘typecast’ by the anthropological paradigm. In fact debates about epistemological issues in anthropology are closely reflected in this region every day.

My thesis (and this paper) will be principally concerned with the domains of language, literacy and literature in Mayan languages. Various efforts are underway in Chiapas by indigenous groups to raise the status of indigenous languages and to develop a canons of indigenous literatures. However there are many obstacles to achieving this and, as mentioned before, many find the anthropological paradigm to be limiting. Almost inevitably, indigenous writers find themselves writing about their culture for a foreign readership of academics who want to study them.