

The real sheep of the Tzotzil

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The Tzotzil ethnic groups of Mayan origin live in the central highland region of Chiapas, in southern Mexico. Over the centuries Tzotzil shepherdesses have gathered a rich empirical knowledge about their sheep. This knowledge has formed the basis of a combined effort between Tzotzil women and the Institute of Indigenous Studies of the University of Chiapas. They work on the genetic improvement of the local breed of sheep, the 'real sheep', on basis of the shepherdesses' own criteria and needs.



More than 200,000 Tzotzil Indians live in scattered communities all over the Chiapas highlands, an isolated mountainous area approximately 2,200 m above sea level. The Tzotzils are very different from the rest of the Mexicans: they speak their own language, live in isolated pockets and dress in traditional garments made from sheep's wool. Small-scale agriculture plays a central role in the Tzotzil society. The women are responsible for the family for a large part of the year, when male members of the family travel to the temperate areas to grow maize on rented land.

Tzotzil tradition has established that the women take care of domestic animals. The Tzotzil women don't keep goats or cattle but most have sheep and fowl. The flocks are small, scarcely 10 sheep, but this is sufficient to make up almost 36% of the family income, which is earned by selling the animals themselves, the wool, woollen garments and handicrafts, and manure for fertiliser. Exclusively women do shepherding and they develop a special relationship with every single one of their sheep.

When the underworld wins

The Tzotzil religion is a mixture of Catholicism and indigenous Mayan beliefs.

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There are several Mayan gods that are linked to natural phenomena, and Mother Earth is respected because she allows human beings to exist. Though Catholicism was introduced with the arrival of the Europeans in the 16th century, many Mayan traditions still remain vibrant amongst the Tzotzils. Their cosmovision includes the concept that all things and living beings have a soul.

In this cosmovision, health and disease are considered the outcome of the constant battle of the forces of the 'underworld' that never cease their attempts to grasp the souls of the people, animals, plants and objects. Disease and eventual death occur when the underworld wins. Some people have the gift to diagnose and heal these illnesses. The healing ceremonies they perform are ritual treatments, which incite the bad spirits to leave the body of the diseased.

For the most common illnesses of the sheep, like diarrhoea and coughing, the shepherdesses use a series of herbs to treat them. Often a series of prayers and rituals are included in the healing, especially if supernatural causes are suspected, like for example 'evil eye' or 'bad air'. The Tzotzil system of healing also includes the concept of fighting diseases that are considered 'warm' with remedies that are considered 'cold'. Commercial veterinary medicines are hardly used be-

cause of the costs involved and not knowing whether these remedies are 'warm' or 'cold'.

Sacred sheep

Another characteristic of the Tzotzil cosmovision is the prohibition to kill sheep, because they are considered the sacred animals that accompany the Patron of the people, Saint John the Baptist. Inside the local church, there is a statue of this Saint with a lamb at his feet. Women visit the shrine regularly with requests to the Saint related to their sheep. An example is a request expressed by Paxcu Lopez-Panela, an old weaver: "Please, Saint John, Patron, grant me this wish, let my sheep be healthy, because I want to take care of your children, with the ones that I already have, which are also your children. I am going to make a yard for them, and I'm going to take good care of them, like the one you have in your hand, because I also love my coffee lamb, my dappled lamb, grant me this wish ..." The Saint complies, the lambs obey and breed and produce wool.

In their homes, the women spend a lot of time washing, combing, spinning and weaving the wool on their back-strap looms. They make the garments that protect their families from the cold mountain air, and that distinguish the Tzotzil from the other indigenous groups of the region.



Photo: Elena Gasparini

Saint John the Baptist, a patron of the Tzotzil people, who is visited regularly by shepherdesses to request the health for their sheep

When a baby girl is born, an old woman puts a little weaving instrument into her tiny hands. The young girls help their mothers tend the sheep and learn the art of transforming the long and coarse tufts of wool into traditional garments.

Mexican sheep

In the highlands of Chiapas there are many sheep, and of course there came extension workers who thought that it would be easy to increase the production of wool in this area. The only thing to be done was to introduce animals of an exotic breed that produce several kilos of fine wool every year, and slowly substitute the native sheep that scarcely produce one kilo in the same time span. But, of course, the exotic sheep of the Rambouillet breed that were introduced, did not adapt to the mountainous climate, couldn't thrive on the poor forage and fight off parasitic illnesses without a supplement of commercial foods.

Even worse was that the women couldn't process the 'bad quality' wool of these animals, because it was too short, too thin and broke easily during the hand weaving processes. Who could have guessed that the short, thin, white wool, which is considered good quality wool by industrial standards, is exactly the opposite of what the Tzotzil women require? Coarse, long locks of wool of different colours make the best material you can have when it is processed by hand instead of by machines.

The animals were also very different from the indigenous breed, physically and in their character traits: they were bigger

and they didn't know how to obey. These were named 'Mexican sheep' as they were considered foreign, unlike their own breed, the 'real sheep'. The Tzotzil shepherdesses soon forgot about these Mexican sheep, but the technicians insisted and attempted again and again with different exotic breeds, but always ended up with the same result.

Working with men

In these attempts to bring in foreign breeds the field workers communicated mainly with the men in the Tzotzil communities. The men speak Spanish and work collectively. What the outsiders did not take into account was that, among the Tzotzil people, only the women are responsible for the sheep and that taking care of them is not done collectively. An added difficulty is that the women speak only Tzotzil, their native language.

Moreover, the technicians had very little interest in the local traditions and in the characteristics of the local breed of sheep,

the ones that the Tzotzil women call 'real sheep'. And they weren't aware that these sheep are part of the family, like 'ritual children', each with their own name. Neither did they understand why the sheep were reprimanded if they didn't take good care of their offspring, nor why the rams for breeding were selected not only on their wool quality, but also on their character, especially in being obedient to the shepherdess and gentle with the lambs.

Institute of Indigenous Studies

The Institute of Indigenous Studies is a department of the University of Chiapas (UNACH), which was founded in 1985 to carry out holistic and multidisciplinary research in the indigenous regions of Chiapas. Today 6 anthropologists and 3 veterinarians work in the Institute as a team of researchers. At any given time, several students work on their graduate and post-graduate degrees. Sometimes external researchers join the team for extended periods of time.

The institute follows three broad lines of academic investigation: history and ethnohistory; contemporary social phenomena (migrations, religions, indigenous woman, traditional medicine and cosmopolitanism); and indigenous production systems and survival strategies (ethnoveterinary medicine and ethnozootecnics, genetic improvement of the Chiapas sheep and the socio-economy of the family unit).

Nearly 10 years ago the Institute for Indigenous Studies started an investigation into the traditional sheep keeping strategies of the Tzotzil communities. The first studies confirmed that traditional animal husbandry was based on very useful empirical knowledge. The shepherdesses were not only able to keep the animals alive in the adverse environment, but could also make them breed and produce reasonable quantities of wool. Later, the discipline of ethnoveterinary medicine was used to study the traditional sheep breeding systems in more detail. The methodology of this study was radically new: it took the knowledge of the Tzotzil women as the point of departure, thus accepting their expertise in the husbandry of sheep. Another programme taken up was the genetic improvement of the Chiapas sheep, in which the selection of the sheep was based on the criteria of the women. The



Photo: Raul Perezgrovas

Tzotzil shepherdesses selecting sheep of the local Chiapas breed on the University farm

sheep selected by the women in the communities were taken to the farm of the University of Chiapas to be evaluated for their characteristics related to wool production. Through the selection and breeding of these animals, it was possible to return rams of the 'improved Chiapas sheep', to indigenous communities.

Wool and character

In the last 10 years, Tzotzil women have collaborated in several stages of this Chiapas sheep improvement program. Based on their knowledge and experience as shepherdesses and weavers, they have indicated criteria for good wool-producing animals. Not only the colour and the cleanliness of the fleece, but also the size of the animal, the length of the locks, the volume of the clipped wool and its suitability for textile processing is taken into account. The women also brought in the importance of respecting the feelings and soul of the sheep, which they consider crucial for conserving health and production. This proved to be the key to the programme of genetic improvement: understanding that elements related to traditions and culture are as important as aspects related to the animals and their wool.

Different project phases

Almost since the beginning of the genetic improvement programme, the Tzotzil women have returned to the university farm every 6 months, usually the week before shearing their sheep. The participatory work with the Tzotzil women in the context of a university has resulted in a process of mutual learning. The researchers have learned to look for more specific details related to wool quality. The women, on the other hand have come to realise that even though the people in charge of the improvement programme speak Spanish, are men (some of them) and are not shepherds, they still feel affection for the animals. They write the names of the sheep, in numbered form

and hang it as at a pendant around the necks of the animals, treat the animals with respect and care, even if there are many in the flock.

A part of the combined efforts concentrates on 'translating' the empirical system of classifying wool quality into a more quantitative system, which has resulted in a more precise selection process of the Chiapas sheep. The quality of the wool is measured by: the length in centimetres, the 'volume' of the wool in kilograms and the 'textile aptitude' as the relation between coarse fibres and fine fibres of locks from different parts of the body.

The genetic improvement programme still produces an increasing quantity of improved animals. The rams for breeding are taken to the indigenous communities through strategies planned with the Tzotzil women. The animals that leave the university farm have adapted fast to the life of the family flocks, learning just as fast to recognise and obey their shepherdesses. The women are happy in their hearts, because they consider these animals to be 'real sheep', that produce long and thick good quality wool, and have lambs that are just as lovely.

The work of the Institute for Indigenous Studies hasn't been easy, because initially the anthropologists considered animals of little importance in the culture and livelihoods of the families. In the years that followed, however, they became convinced that traditional sheep keeping is an important part of the culture of the ethnic groups of Chiapas. For the veterinarians the discussions with the anthropologists have been very useful as they have learned to incorporate a histori-



Photo: Ellen Geerlings

While working with sheep improvement programmes, many projects did not take into account that only the women are responsible for the sheep and that herding is not done collectively

cal and ethnographical framework into the work, and to place the indigenous woman in the centre of the family and agricultural production unit. Hence, in short, the contact between vets and anthropologists has been mutually beneficial.

Over the years, the national government and other universities have also been involved in this programme of genetic improvement of the Chiapas sheep. Yet, this genetic improvement programme of Chiapas sheep remains an 'exception'. In most agricultural and veterinary colleges the students are only taught the conventional ways of genetic improvement, by introducing exotic breeds and other elements of modern animal husbandry. The experience with the 'real sheep' of the Tzotzil shepherdesses teaches us that reality is far more complex. We can no longer ignore the experiences and the cosmovision of the people who live in the communities, and it is time to adapt what is being taught at all institutes of higher education.

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Respecting feelings to prevent disease

On the university farm, the women were in charge of selecting the best animals in terms of wool and character. In an attempt to speed up the selection of the animals, several groups of women were asked to help identify the sheep that produced bad quality wool, so as to eliminate them from the flock. The women entered the yards, checked the animals and said: *"the sheep are all fine, they all produce good wool."* This was very confusing, because there were sheep in the yards that were clearly below the standards of quality that the women themselves had established.

During the break, the university staff asked the Tzotzil interpreter what was going on and she finally explained. *"The women cannot do what you ask because if they did the animals would become ill. Animals have a soul and feelings, and if they were to hear that the shepherdesses are criticising them or the wool they produce, or the young that they give birth to, their hearts would fill with sadness and they would fall ill and die."*

After some deliberation, the following solution was found: the women were asked to choose the 3 best animals in the yard, their registration numbers were taken down and the animals were moved to a different yard. Then the next best 3 were chosen and so on until all the sheep had been evaluated. In this way the quality of the sheep was evaluated without hurting the feelings of the animals.