

Occupied on Mayan Time II

Levels: 9-12

Subjects: ELL, reading, literacy.

Objectives: By the end of the lesson, students should have a good, basic grasp of Zapatismo, Oscar Oliva and the Maya influence on Zapatismo.

By the end of the lesson, learners will be able to answer the following questions:

- a) Where is Chiapas?
- b) What is Zapatismo?
- c) When and where did Zapatismo begin?
- d) What was Oscar Oliva's role in Zapatismo?
- e) Who is Subcommandante Marcos?
- f) What's his role in Zapatismo?
- g) What has Zapatismo achieved since it began?

Learners will examine:

- a) What would you do if someone invaded your land?
- b) When is a revolution ok?
- c) What revolutions do you know about from history?
- d) How would you organize a revolution?
- e) Can a revolution be peaceful?

Oscar Oliva: The Rebel Heart of Chiapas Poetry.

"For the Maya and the Zoque of Chiapas, time is not calendars and watches. Time is the rainy seasons, the slow passing of the constellations and the agricultural breath of the mountains, the valleys and the rainforests. They feel the rhythm of the land; the pulse of the land beats in their pulse, and from this they know that time says something to them. Their struggle has no time, neither a beginning nor an end, and they can continue for another 500 years."

(Oscar Oliva)

There is not much material in English available on Oliva, but teachers would do well to research Oliva's colleagues in the peace talks, Juan Banuelos and Bishop Samuel Ruiz, as well as the literary movement *La Espiga Amotinada*. There are many histories of Zapatismo available, including online at the Schools for Chiapas Library. For further information on Oliva, teachers may contact poet and translator of Oliva's poetry, Keith Payne: keith.payne@mac.com. Alternatively, Spanish speaking teachers and/or learners will find plenty of online information regarding Oliva and his work that can then be presented to the class.

Learners read the article from *The Irish Times*. This can be printed by teachers and handed out with several paragraph headings for learners to match as they read.

Pre-reading activities/discussions can include:

- Where is Chiapas?
- Which Mexican poets do you know?
- What is Zapatismo?
- What would you do if someone invaded your land?
- When is revolution ok?
- What revolutions do you know about from history?
- How do you organize a revolution?
- Can it be a revolution be peaceful?

Post-reading activities and/or discussion should focus on the Mayan influence on Zapatismo. For some of the following questions, students will need to do follow up research at home or during class time:

- When and where did Zapatismo begin?
- What was Óscar Oliva's role in Zapatismo?
- Who is Subcommandante Marcos?
- What's his role in Zapatismo?
- What has Zapatismo achieved since it began?
- Has it been successful? Why or why not?

Rebel hearts beat with the ‘poetry of vitality’

The essence of the Mexican Zapatista revolutionaries dwells in the work of Oscar Oliva, a poet and a political intermediary.

(Keith Payne, *Irish Times*, 01.25.2014)

I first came across the name Óscar Oliva on a bus north to the Mexican city of Zacatecas last December. The sun was setting and the big sky was opening up like a Spanish translation of Seamus Heaney’s lines “We have no prairies / To slice a big sun at evening.”

I had been reading Benjamin Anaya’s *Rebel Soundtrack: Zapatista Music*, in which Oliva appeared alongside his fellow poet Juan Bañuelos and Samuel Ruiz, the bishop of the southern Mexican state of Chiapas.

In 1994 the Zapatista Army of National Liberation had asked Oliva and Bañuelos to join its delegation for peace talks with the Mexican government. The Zapatista struggle, 20 years long this month, was never truly an armed struggle. From the “Conference of the Indigenous” in Chiapas in 1974 to taking to the streets 20 years later, the Zapatistas had been involved in constant defensive actions against the Mexican state and the ever-encroaching corporate and military incursions into Chiapas. Civil resistance has always been their main form of action. Indigenous Mayan beliefs also play a key role in Zapatismo ideology.

Anaya’s book opens with a quote from Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos, the de facto spokesman for the Zapatistas: “Old Antonio used to say that in this utopian dream in which we’re better human beings, the colour and sound of reality was so rich that sometimes music was made from it.” Old Antonio was right, and the music in this case is supplied by Oliva himself.

We were on the bus going to the Ramón López Velarde Poetry Festival, at which Oliva was to be honoured. In the poem *Hoy, Como Nunca (Now, as Never . . .)*, which Samuel Beckett translated while he cast about for a publisher for *Waiting for Godot*, López Velarde had written:

Now, as never, I need your presiding peace; yet already your throat is but a whiteness of suffering, suffocating, coughing, coughing.

Presiding over the peace was part of what brought Oliva back to Chiapas in 1994; he was a poet acting as a political intermediary.

As we drove on through the desert, the nopal and mesquite sprouting either side of us under the ever-widening sky, I cast my mind back to Chiapas, where I had been last September: Palenque and the Mayan ruins appearing out of the rainforest; San Cristóbal de las Casas, where the Zapatistas first announced themselves; and Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of Chiapas and the birthplace of Oliva. While there I was constantly aware of Mexico being elsewhere, as being other than the high sierras where I was regularly drenched

in a rainy-season deluge. In Chiapas locals would ask, “So, have you been to Mexico yet?” or, “When are you heading up to Mexico?” as if it were entirely a foreign country. The disassociation is so subtle, yet it blows steadier than the flag-waving we are perhaps used to.

The North American Free Trade Agreement between Canada, Mexico and the US came into force on January 1st, 1994, the day the Zapatistas issued their first declaration, and their “revolutionary laws”, from the Lacandon Jungle. The movement considered the Mexican government so out of touch with the Mexican people as to have become illegitimate.

This led the Zapatistas to take to the streets of San Cristóbal and other towns in the region, declaring for democracy, liberty and justice for the indigenous population. As the sociologist Yvon Le Bot put it: “They don’t ask to be treated as citizens equal to the rest, nor as citizens different to the rest, but as citizens with their differences.”

Hearing the declaration, Oliva returned to his native Chiapas. His often corporeal poetry is full of hands, lips, joints, saliva, blood and nerves. “It’s as if my hands were dipped in blood,” he writes in *Impotency of Pure Thought*. In a land where talk is as plentiful as taco stands, Oliva sounds the true note. Indulging my curiosity over lunch one afternoon at the poetry festival in December, Oliva explains how Marcos and his comrades came to Chiapas not to lead a revolution but to learn how to resist. “They didn’t come to teach the natives how to fight,” he says. “They were all fuelled up on Marxism and liberation theology, as we all were at the time. But they had to learn from the Maya. They learned to integrate and adapt to the reality of the indigenous world of Chiapas. They had to take into account the long history of indigenous rebellions and insurgences, from their forms of political and social organisation, from their powerful culture. They learned to walk with these people, and they became their disciples. They learned, on this long road, to listen and to listen to themselves.”

Indigenous wisdom: There is a particular Zapatista form of resistance; it is an indigenous wisdom and the harvesting of the *flor de la palabra*, the “flower of the word”, which has given us such gems from Marcos as his opening gambit in San Cristóbal at the start of the revolution: “We apologise for any inconvenience; this is a revolution.”

In a way this has seen the colonised handing ideas back to the coloniser. Horizontal forms of social struggle, assembly-led decision-making, and participatory democracy where you are answerable to your community are all taking root back here in the “Old World”; from Plaza del Sol in Madrid and the 15-M Movement to the Occupy encampments from St Paul’s to our own Dame Street and on to Wall Street, their ideas have spread quietly but surely. Much of this has to do with the notion of time. “For the Maya and the Zoque of Chiapas, time is not calendars and watches,” says Oliva. “Time is the rainy seasons, the slow passing of the constellations and the agricultural breath of the mountains, the valleys and the rainforests. They feel the rhythm of the land; the pulse of the land beats in their pulse; and from this they know that time says something to them. Their struggle has no time, neither a beginning nor an end, and they can continue for another 500 years.”

This beat, this rhythm has pulsed in Oliva's poetry since his return to Chiapas. "I began to recover colours, tastes, the air. I saw once again the immensity of the rivers and the immensity of the skies but, more than anything else, the spirit of the men of the jungle and the mountains of Chiapas."

This is evident in his earlier poems, such as the magnificent example of the Latin American long poem *Behind the Wheel of an Automobile on the Pan-American Highway from Tuxtla to Mexico City*:

I wandered the hideous streets
where the people crawled
out of work with nothing to eat
thieves or maybe criminals
who stretched their eyes up to my shirt
and it was like stepping back into the movies
back into Buñuel's *The Forgotten*.

There is also the "testimony spoken from the guts" of Oliva's hymn to the Zapatista revolutionaries, *Lienzos Transparentes (Transparent Canvases)*. This, according to Olivas, is "a book born not from the desire to write poems but from the need to account for these times".

His is a poetry of necessity. There is a poetry for all occasions. From my stay in Mexico, with poets from Nicaragua, Venezuela, Costa Rica, Mexico, San Salvador and elsewhere in the Americas, I have learned that their work, and Oliva's poetry in particular, is the poetry of vitality.

In one poem Oliva asks, "Just what kind of a world will you be born into?" and then offers an answer of "the world of just another strange dream". During a speech at the festival he eyes brightly the assembled poets in front of him on a patio in Zacatecas on a warm December evening and asks, "And what will you write about?"

Poems by Óscar Oliva

These poems are from the collection *Lienzos Transparentes* (Transparent Canvases), which is a “semi-dark hymn to the people of the Zapatista rebellion”. The first is set at the beginning of 1994, when Oliva returned to Chiapas and began working in the peace delegation. The second represents the “trees of the foundation of the rebellion”. The translations are by Keith Payne.

It is January

January, and I take the air;
roses and the remains of war and fire;
my pupil bleeds; no, no I'll never unwrap the air.
I am diseased like the honeybee.
The clay breathes and it will survive.
They will also survive the veins that bleed,
the nuptial nods, my milk teeth.
Will I ever make it up that hill?
I am it seems enduring certain hymns.

Founding trees

Founding trees
I sing softly
under low skies
so not to multiply their birdsong.
Not be sapped in their waters.

Keith Payne is an Irish writer living in Spain. He has recently represented Ireland at poetry festivals in Mexico City, Almoloya and Zacatecas.