The role of anthropology in the changes and challenges of 21st century

Salomón Nahmad Sittón

71st Annual Meeting
Society for Applied Anthropology

SFAA Award Ceremony and Malinowski Lecture

1 April 2011

In order to create and maintain a space for Spanish, I will read in Spanish, accompanied by images and the English text (also available in paper copies).
It is a high honor for me to receive this recognition from the Society for Applied Anthropology, named after Malinowski, one of the greatest applied anthropologists of the twentieth century.

In Mexico, Malinowski worked with my professor, Julio de la Fuente, who I would like to recognize tonight, since he mentored me and showed me how to use anthropology to fight for the native peoples of Mexico and Latin America.
I am overwhelmed with emotion today, in the presence of so many distinguished colleagues and friends who, over the years, have encouraged and supported me in the work of applied anthropology.

Ted Downing, Martha Rees, Tom Weaver, Phil Dennis, Carlos Vélez, Claudio Esteva Frabregat, Rodolfo Stavehagen, (the late) Margarita Nolasco, (the late) Guillermo Bonfil, Leonel Durán, Susana Drucker, James Greenberg, (the late) Sandy Davis (the late), Johnny Murra, and (the late) Eric Wolf, as well as the Mexican and US scientific community who have used the social sciences to build toward a peaceful future for humankind that maintains and reproduces cultural diversity.
I was mentored by many wonderful professors: Roberto Weitlaner, Juan Comas, Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, Alfonso Caso, John Murra, Eric Wolf, Ángel Palerm—who opened the door to a theory and practice of social and cultural change with justice, dignity and equity for the native peoples of our countries, for their full, autonomous participation and self determination.
• I also want to recognize the professors and researchers at the University of Yucatan—Gabriela Vargas-Cetina, Steffan Igor Ayora-Díaz and Francisco Fernández Repetto, who promoted my candidacy for this award, together with my colleagues from CIESAS (the Social Anthropology Research and Advanced Study Center), headed by Virginia García.

• I thank Allan Burns, since it is during his presidency (of the SfAA), that I was awarded this important prize as well, as the warm words of my colleague Margarita Dalton.
• I especially want to thank my beloved wife Ximena Avellaneda for her support during the good times and bad, and in all my professional activities.

• I am grateful to my sons Daniel, David, Alejandro and Yuri and my granddaughters Anita, Natalia, and Nina for joining us tonight.
Revolution and Assimilation

The field work that I did in the course of my anthropological career enabled me to reconsider my ideas and consider the profound contradictions of the assimilationist Mexican indigenist project that grew out of the nation-building of the post 1910 Mexican revolution.

Because of these contradictions many government projects conflicted with and contradicted other national policies, causing them to fail. As a result, many anthropologists have found themselves in direct conflict with powerful regional and national interests.
The indigenous peoples of Mexico

The over 12 million indigenous peoples of Mexico, have been the center of my ethnographical and ethnological work, since I began as a social work student in the Tonantzintla and Chipilo, Puebla in 1955. From these peoples, I have learned a lot: I learned about the incredible importance of their collective rights in the face of the intense exploitation, exclusion and racism that they have experienced throughout that long night of colonialism and internal neocolonialism.

...have never stopped struggling to be recognized as peoples, and to be included in the national project, but without success.
Otomí family, Estado de Hidalgo. 1992
At the end of 1982, I was named Director of the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) [the National Indigenous Institute of the Mexican government]. My career path until then was based on using anthropological perspectives and criteria to change the asymmetrical relations between indigenous peoples and the national state. In the INI, I decided to step up the rate of change in indigenous policy from assimilation to self-development and ethnic autonomy, called by anthropologists in my generation—ethno-development.
I started with a project among the Yaqui peoples of Sonora (studied by our colleague Edward Spicer), as a good place to begin the transformation from indigenist paternalism and protectionism to grassroots autonomy.
With the rise of indigenous social science, Western (colonial) socio-cultural anthropology has faced an identity crisis. Ethnic groups have begun recover their history and study themselves, to design their own life projects and development programs, taking advantage of the knowledge that the social sciences have given them. In this case, we began with Yoreme or Yaqui authorities and their young intellectuals, who formed, after three months of internal discussion, their own Integrated Development Plan of the Yaqui Tribe, agreed upon by all their communities. On June 1, 1983, we took this document to the President of Mexico, Miguel de la Madrid, for him to execute so the Yaqui people could to enter into an equal relationship with Mexican society.
There was no response to their proposal. However, within a few months, the Mexican Education Secretariat (under whom I worked) headed by Jesús Reyes Heroles, who represented the interests of the dominant creole/mestizo society, expressed the threat represented by my commitment to the process of change in the—up to then—frozen, indigenist policy, that they, in an attempt to turn back the INI’s new direction, began a process of repression—a sign of that neocolonial indigenism that had dominated Mexico’s history. They charged me with criminal action and held me in jail for five months.
The Yaqui

I thank the Yaqui people of Sonora for all they’ve taught me. As owners of one of the most fertile regions of Mexico—their territory is crossed by the Yaqui River, whose waters turn the desert into an oasis—-one of the most productive agricultural regions of Mexico.

The Yaqui peoples have resisted Mexican attempts to break them up and wipe them out through centuries of bloody wars—the last of which ended only in 1929. Some Yaqui found refuge among the O’odam or Papago of Arizona where they were protected as refugees (Edward Spicer, also a winner of the Malinowski prize, got the US Yaqui reservation recognized).
Thanks to the actions of anthropologists around the world, and in particular, the Society for Applied Anthropology, I was freed.

I later received academic support from the Fulbright Foundation, Texas Tech University and the University of Arizona, where I developed deep friendships with members of the academic community.

Negotiations between the Seri and national and state officials (1974)
They taught me that what they want is full autonomy. 

As a result of this history, the Yaqui live in two countries, as do many other indigenous peoples in the Americas and in the world. Even so, they adamantly maintain their right to self-government and self determination and keep their social structures closed against penetration by the dominant society. They do not accept the legitimacy of municipal structures, they resist negotiating with the state government and they will only negotiate with the federal government of Mexico. **They taught me that what they want is full autonomy.** I attempted to meet these demands and paid the price.
The role of the church

The Church is another institution that has aimed at control of indigenous peoples ever since the conquest in 1521. The Church has attempted to maintain control of all forms of indigenous religiosity, under the guise of Liberation Theology they have become increasingly sophisticated in the continuous campaign of so-called religious enculturation or spiritual conquest. This is just another way of assimilating indigenous peoples into a greco-roman ideology that aims to eliminate indigenous religious ideologies--past or present---including their community ideology.
I always respected the *wixarika* or *huichol* religion, which brought me into direct conflict with the Franciscan Bishop who was evangelizing the Huichol, the Cora and the Tepehano.

Salomon Nahmad taking the first peyot found in Virikuta, San Luis Potosí with Huichol and the *marakame* Ramón Medina (1968)
As part of their religious practice, the Huichol bathe the statues of Jesus and the Virgin of Guadalupe in deer or bull blood.

The resident nuns were horrified and took them away and put in new ones.

So the Huichol came to talk to me, and they asked me to intervene with the church so that they could get their saints back. If not, they threatened to burn the mission down, and kick all the nuns out.

A Franciscan priest who had studied anthropology in the US agreed that the nuns had no cause to interfere in the life of the community, but the Bishop was opposed. Father Loera, who built the Huichol museum in Guadalajara, managed to return the sculptures to the Huichol, and avoided a bigger conflict.

But I got into big trouble over this.

The governor complained, and guess what?

I was thrown out of Nayarit.
Another important aspect of the assimilationist policy is imposition of the ideals of western democracy—political parties and elections—on the systems of community and municipal cargos [volunteer offices] in indigenous regions. The goal, at the national and state levels, is the disappearance of the community, its collective forms of elections and exchange them for participation by individual vote, in opposition to the collective political identities of Mexico’s indigenous communities.
Usos y Costumbres

My experience in the Mixe region of Oaxaca in 1963 motivated me to take proposals to the National Senate and some state governors to create a Law of *usos y costumbres* (USES AND CUSTOMS LAW that respects community forms of organization and assembly).
Ley de derechos de los pueblos y comunidades indígenas de Oaxaca (1996)

In Oaxaca, these changes have been implemented in more than 400 indigenous municipalities who govern themselves through a system of cargos, not by political parties, which is what they want to impose on all the indigenous municipalities in Mexico.
Field work for anthropological research permitted us, the anthropologists, to think about the basis of the relation between Mexican society and indigenous peoples, how the assimilationist project was grafted into government programs, and became part of the national discourse, permitting the continuation of the project of national domination of the indigenous peoples.

In the case of the indigenous population of Mexico, this has played an important role in the capitalist economic development of Mexico, which is why so many contradictions and ambivalence exists between anthropological analysis and state policies.
Guillermo Bonfil
(1935-1991)

Colleagues in my generation, including my great friend, Guillermo Bonfil redefined Alfonso Caso’s (ideologue and first director of INI) ‘indio’.

Bonfil’s is the most representative of the change in social relations in Mexican society.
“within the system as a whole, the colonized is single and plural (the *indian* and the *indians*), forming a single category that includes and uniformizes the dominanted sector; internally it disaggregates them into multiple local units that weaken the ancient loyalites over parrochial identity.”

“*indio* is a *supraethnic category* that has no specific content in terms of the groups that it refers to, but rather a particular relation between them and the other sectors of the global social system of which the *indios* form a part.

The category of *indio* denotes the condition of colonized and necessarily references the colonial relation.”
These new definitions are reflected in the statements of international institutions, such as the International Labor Organization, the United Nations, the World Bank. These show the effect and influence of applied anthropology.
The terms ‘indigenous populations’, ‘indigenous ethnic minorities’, ‘tribal groups’ and ‘registered tribes’ describe social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from that of the dominant society, that makes them vulnerable and puts them at a disadvantage in the development process. For the purposes of this directive, the term ‘indigenous populations’ will be used to refer to these groups.
Indigenous populations can be identified, to a certain degree, by the following characteristics:

1. strong ties to the ancestral territory and natural resources
2. self identification and identification by others, as members of a distinct cultural group
3. an indigenous language, commonly different from the national language
4. presence of social and political custom-based institutions, and
5. production primarily oriented to subsistence
Neglecting the role of indigenous peoples of Mexico has caused, in most cases, the failure of development projects directed at indigenous regions, because they aim at *replacing* indigenous cultures instead of *developing* them.
In the indigenous community, tradition combines with modern, even though some forms of community, tastes, language and forms of organization have changed. This dynamic is the result of a clash between two forces. On the one hand, traditional systems contradicted many elements of modern capitalist economies. On the other hand, these systems interfere with community life. To understand and accept contemporary indigenous reality, development projects in indigenous regions must take the ethnic dimension into account.
Indigenist policy was based on anthropological knowledge, and that’s why anthropology has played a key role in national politics for almost one hundred years, ever since Gamio turned the archaeological site of Teotihuacan into the center of national heritage, an applied anthropology project that proposed breaking up the power relations between the state and original peoples of Mexico and building an interethnic, symmetrical and egalitarian society.
The indigenist worker/activist is not just an applied anthropologist, but everyone who commits their specialized knowledge to changing the asymmetrical relations between federal and state institutions and indigenous peoples. Since the times of Malinowski, Durkheim and Gamio, up to the anthropologists and social scientists of today, the study of social reality has to contribute to improving the life conditions and social relations of human beings.

Salomón Nahmad, Director of the INI Center for the Cora-Huichol region

(Photograph by Peter T Furst, August 1967.)
All state, private sector, church (Christian, Catholic or evangelical), and NGO actions share the assimilationist project, but indigenous peoples do not fully participate in the national project, and not just because of their position as colonized, subjugated and discriminated peoples, but also as subjects of this exclusionary project. Indigenism in Mexico was able, over the course of one hundred years, to overcome some of these conditions and to pave the way for some of the changes achieved up to the current day.

Mercado maya de Oxkutzcab, Yucatán, al fondo la iglesia
However actual conditions have not changed the structure of asymmetrical neocolonial relations. Today, the greatest exclusion and poverty persists among the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Latin America and the world. Research presented at this conference reveals the role of globalizing politics, as applied sciences, like anthropology, have expanded the influence on the structural changes occurring in different regions studied by researchers. The recently approved (2007) United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a huge achievement.

Today, indigenous peoples have lost control over and access to much of their own natural resources, and even to their own work force. This has caused the transfer of much of their production and labor to the market—precisely the reason that the global phenomena of generalized and extreme poverty exists.

The loss of the best land, soil erosion, loss of irrigation, over-exploitation of forestry reserves and the conversion of fertile land to the production of goods for national and international markets, have caused malnutrition and the loss of systems of self-sufficiency that have existed for hundreds of years.
What applied anthropology has always aimed for is that the people we work with be considered as full human beings with individual \textit{and} collective, social, and cultural rights, just like everyone else. We work for the elimination of all forms of discrimination and racism, that have been made visible thanks to anthropological research.

Precisely it is this commitment that puts anthropologists at \textbf{risk}; as I--and surely many of my colleagues who are here tonight--can attest. That’s why I want to remember some of these events here tonight.

Indigenous prisoners in the Huasteca (Hidalgo)
The indigenous regions of Mexico have become the poorest of the poor. The states of Oaxaca, Chiapas, Guerrero, Hidalgo, Yucatan, etc.—the states with the highest percentages of indigenous peoples—have the highest poverty rates.

The World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank have begun special projects to help slow deterioration of subsistence agriculture in thousands of indigenous households. However, many people migrate with the hope of being able to get a job. This aggravates urban problems, not just in Mexico, but also in many cities in the US.
Indigenous peoples and human and cultural rights: ethnic diversity and the nation-state

Liberal theories of minority rights should explain how minority rights coexist with human rights, and also how minority rights are limited by the principles of individual liberty, democracy and social justice. This explanation makes up the basis of the search for an inclusive system of cultural and ethnic diversity that creates a human society that is intercultural and socially inclusive.
Aside from the common rights of all citizens, we need a differentiated citizenship, according to which the state is obliged to adopt ‘special measures’ to articulate the differences between ethnic groups. This policy could be stated as **symmetrical interethnic relations**. As I understand it, there are three forms of differentiated rights with respect to ethnic group membership:

1. Rights to self government or autonomy (the delegation of powers to the original peoples, the national minorities, often through some kind of federalism).
2. Multiethnic rights (financial support and legal protection for certain practices associated with specific ethnic groups or native peoples)
3. Special rights to guaranteed representation in national chambers for native peoples or ethnic groups.

Anthropological ethics and the defense of native peoples in Mexico

Anthropology is radically opposed to the idea of a fixed and eternal human nature. Applied social anthropology is basically a critical science of cultural models. There is no human society that doesn’t seek a better life. Anthropology is profoundly tied to humanist ethics, and, with that, to universal philosophy.
In writing these words, I associate my early experience studying and critically analyzing the ethics of my own existence through the influence of psychoanalysis, based on my early social work studies with Erich Fromm, and later, ethnology and anthropology. Anthropology, as the science of human kind, is part of the ethical humanist tradition in which human knowledge is the basis for establishing norms and values that help keep the peace and establish equality between all peoples and cultures.
With this central tenet, anthropology, as I understand it, attempts to explain human diversity—individual, social and cultural, and from this to achieve human growth and development of *humans*, based on our nature and make-up.

Lacandón boy
The minimal ethical position is freedom of speech, and the voice for all stakeholders in decisions related to social programs. This is the role that applied anthropology should play in research--formulating criteria based on justice and solidarity, respect for the autonomy of every human as a person, every family as a basic unit of society, of each community or pueblo or ethnic group.
This basic ethic treats all human beings as we treat ourselves. This minimal principal recognizes all human beings as valid partners and is expressed by recognizing the rights of stakeholders. It becomes a practice of deliberative democracy, a form of dialogue for radical and participative democracy.
Most of all, because we are speaking of transforming the cultures of violence, of war, of exploitation, of marginalization and exclusion by other cultures, the goal of anthropological action is to achieve peace among the peoples of the world. The first step is the mutual recognition between all humans and groups, based on autonomy, justice and solidarity. It is a framework in which we honor our commitments to our own communities, languages, cultures, and belief systems.
The idea of an ethic of applied anthropology should be based on the argument that human beings, even when they act as a group, or in conflict situations, can act and behave humanly when they are influenced by so-called rationality, empathy and non violent philosophy. The history of relations between politics and anthropology, from this point of view, is the history of the ongoing attempt to moralize politics by creating situations and institutions that limit and reduce the use of violence as a resource, and that favor using dialogue, equitable social commitment and the peaceful solution to conflicts.
Three important developments in this direction are:

1. the increase in the number of nation-states with a democratic organization, even though with variable effectiveness, in which political struggle is conducted through dialogue, and not by suppression;

2. the creation of the United Nations as a governing body based on fundamental human rights.

3. The practical exploration, on a large scale, of methods of non violent struggle, from those that have been used by the working classes in the struggle between capital and labor, to those that were practiced by Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Nelson Mandela and many more in the struggle for independence or for their basic human rights.
Finally, we see today the negative consequences of the use of violence in conflicts between states and ethnic groups, challenges--including the most serious of this century in Afghanistan and Bolivia, for example--that *counteract* anthropological work and democratic methods to empower and develop projects that permit the building and strengthening human coexistence through non-violent, democratic methods.
The call for papers for this 71st annual meeting of the Society for Applied Anthropology sets out the challenges that anthropologists and social researchers face in their search for alternatives in building the future by pointing out the changes that humanity needs. We should continue to seek new methods and concepts to solve problems in societies such as Mexico, as I have indicated in this speech.

My experience has shown that we have to seek these answers from indigenous peoples of Mexico and the rest of the world.

As they achieve full autonomy, we will have fewer conflicts and be able to live a humane and diverse life.

This will be our most important contribution as applied anthropologists to human sciences.
¡Muchas gracias!