

An SfAA Oral History Interview with Salomón Nahmad

Reflections by the 2011 Malinowski Awardee on his Career in Mexican Anthropology

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Introduction

Born in 1935 to an immigrant Arabic-speaking family from Aleppo, Syria, Salomón Nahmad-Sitton started as one of the few male students in social work, and that work led him to anthropology, where he was quickly scooped up by the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI), the Mexican federal Indian agency, that, at that time, administered indigenous groups, their health, education and other resources. In his time in the INI, Salomón made his career and had a reputation for getting in trouble— getting kicked out of Jalisco, Nayarit, Michoacán and Yucatán, to name a few, culminating when he was jailed in 1983. After a Fulbright in the US in the mid 1980s, he and his wife, Ximena Avellaneda, moved to Oaxaca, where he is today a senior researcher and past director of the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS). I met Salomón and Ximena in the late 1970s when they built a home in Ajusco, where I was doing my dissertation fieldwork. Subsequently, I worked for Salomón in the INI (1983). We have continued our friendship for over three decades, through thick and thin. This interview is a small attempt to record many of the stories and experiences I had heard about and shared over the years.

SfAA Oral History Chair note: Professor Rees transcribed and translated the interviews in addition to doing the interviews. The following represents a selection from the transcript.

Martha: It's 6pm on July 3, 2010, in Salomón Nahmad's house, starting our oral history interview about his career in applied anthropology. Thank you for making time for me.

Salomón: Thanks to you. When I was very young, 17 or 18 years old, I started studying social work in the UNAM [National Autonomous University of Mexico], and there I had the opportunity to meet one of my mentors, who worked in psychology, psychoanalysis, and psychiatry, and that's how I got into psychology and psychoanalysis. And I was very young; I was 19 when I worked for Eric Fromm. That's when I met Eric Fromm, that was in 1954- 1955.

Martha: And, what kind of work did you do?

Salomón: It was to interview worker mothers in Mexico City, where they had some 'women workers' houses'. I interviewed them in order to learn about the personality and psychology of the Mexican woman worker. [Fromm] understood a lot of Spanish because all of his Mexican students were psychoanalyzed with him. The first 12 Frommian psychoanalysts were Mexicans.

Martha: But, how did a young man from a family like yours get interested in these social [justice] issues?

Salomón: Well, look, as a child, I saw discrimination against indigenous people in Orizaba, Veracruz, where I went to school. I was born in Mexico City, but my mother and father moved to Orizaba and that's where I went to school.

Martha: So, you say that as a child you witnessed discrimination against the indigenous people and that it affected you?

Salomón: Yes, because of the kids who went to school with me, some were not indigenous and some were....

Martha: Were most of the kids in the school bothered by the injustice of the discrimination?

Salomón: No, because the kids discriminated; they'd say, 'that's an indio who doesn't speak good Spanish....'

Martha: But you, you were affected [by the discrimination]?

Salomón: I was affected because at home, my grandmother didn't speak good Spanish, because her native tongue was Arabic, although my mother and father spoke Spanish well, because they'd gotten to Mexico very young.

Martha: So, you transferred the experience of injustice or inequality that existed at home to what became your life interest?

Salomón: ...and to [my] elementary school and the social environment in Orizaba. Orizaba is a centro rector regional

that controlled this Nahuatl region, mexicanos who speak mexicano. That's how I got...—I was always interested in learning about people, and, well, this made me study social work.

Martha: And, how did you go from psychology to anthropology?

Salomón: Ah, that's the story. When I was in the UNAM, was when University City was opened, and when it opened, they hired social workers, and I was still a student at that time, but I was the first male social work student, because they were all women.... I was lucky that the psychoanalyst who taught psychology invited me to work on social problems. And one of those problems was the study of working class women. And [Eric] Fromm wanted to study Mexican working class women, to compare (them) with German working class women under Nazism, because he wanted to see how much the authoritarian personality, the dominant, imposing character of the German mother was reflected in Mexican mothers.

.... In 1957, then [the ENAH—Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia] (t)hat's where [Manuel] Gamio studied, where the Aztec calendar was, La Coitlicue and all the large archaeological pieces were in the central courtyard. And the ENAH was on the third floor, in three rooms. We were just a few students, between, counting all the students, there were no more than 80–100, but including archaeology, all years and classes. But, I entered with Andrés Medina, with Margarita Nolasco, with Lina Odena, and with Luis Reyes, and a number of other classmates, I don't remember all their names, but there were no more than 10-15 [in my class].... Eduardo Matos Moctezuma. Well, it was a small group. The previous class had Guillermo Bonfíl, Enrique Valencia, Rodolfo Stavenhagen, they were all a bit ahead of me.[1]

Martha: But you all hung out together...

Salomón: Well, ok, it was a very important generation because our professors in the ENAH like Pablo Martínez del Río, Wilbert Jiménez Moreno, Alfonso Caso, Ignacio Bernal, Juan Comas, (Roberto) Weitlaner, Jorge Avivó. And the younger professors included Fernando Camera, Arturo Monzón, Johanna Faulhaber—the ethnohistorian who worked in the MixtecaError! Bookmark not defined. who just died. Well, you can imagine the quality of the professors, they already went to the AAA, to the Congress of Americanisms, they were all distinguished archaeologists, linguists like Maurice Swadesh. They were all my professors.

Martha: Incredible. What a privilege.

Salomón: It was a privilege, because I was young, and already working, I was married, so I worked in the morning and went to class in the afternoons.

Martha: And all this motivated you, because they were idealistic?

Salomón: Yes. And there were some who were very Marxist, and others who weren't so Marxist, but were a bit cautious about this, because the majority of the compañeros (fellow students) in the ENAH were very leftist. In general, the school was leftist....

Martha: Marxist or for social justice?

Salomón: Social change, social critique.

Martha: ...and [Arturo] Warman, was he in this group, or....?

Salomón: No, he entered later, with Tere Rojas, he was much later.

Martha: It [the ENAH] was the only anthropology program in Mexico at that time?

Salomón: ...[there was one] in Veracruz, just starting, or maybe not yet, I don't remember exactly, but Aguirre Beltrán went to Veracruz as Rector and left the INI,[2] and started the Anthropology School in Veracruz, which was the second anthropology program in the country.

Martha: So, you finished your degree?

Salomón: No, I was a pasante (all but the BA thesis), and I was taking my last classes and studying, but I was there when ciudad Sahagún was opened.... My social work thesis was about ciudad Sahagún, about the problems there when plachiquero[3] peasants became proletarians, they became workers in railroad car factories, automobile factories, in the textile industry. So I started

Martha: I remember that we read case studies about this, in graduate school, as models of development.

Salomón: Yes because there was the idea that rural Mexico could be industrialized. I learned a lot with Ricardo Pozas.... [Alfonso] Caso asked us, 'what year are you all [in school]?' And we all said, 'we're taking the last few courses in our major.' And he said,

‘who wants to work here in the INI?’ And I raised my hand right away. ...

Martha: Why [did you do that]?

Salomón: Because I wanted to do anthropology.... And then, he said to me, well, go talk to Julio de la Fuentes—and the next day I went with Julio, and I told him, ‘Dr. Caso told me to talk to you.’ So, he interviewed me and then said, take a seat, you’re going to start today.’

Martha: And that was in 1961?

Salomón: About 1962. But in that period, that initial period in the INI, he sent us to Chiapas, to San Cristóbal and from there, he sent me to a Tzeltal community, Zaragoza de la Montaña.

Martha: To do what?

Salomón: To do a study of the possibility of the indigenous buying a finca (large extension of agricultural land) in tierra caliente (tropical lowlands). Because [the community] was located in the highlands, near Comitán, and I was there for about a month, doing fieldwork.... I got in there and did a house-by-house study, asking why they wanted to buy the finca, what did they want it for. And what they wanted was this: because the tierra fria [temperate highlands] didn’t produce [enough] maize, they always had a maize deficit. Since in the tropical lowlands they could [produce maize], they wanted to buy land and grow maize. Since they had a lot of forest, they sold their wood as lumber [to buy maize]. And they had a large balance in the Fondo de Fomento Ejidal[4], and with that money, after the report, they bought the finca in Zaragoza de la Montaña.

.... [Then I went to Jalisco where] the Franciscans continued to insist on evangelizing the indigenous, a huevo, by force.

Martha: How do they do it?

Salomón: Well, they fight with the communities, and the communities have burned down their missions and once, the nuns of Guadalupe Ocotlán went into the church where the Huicholes carry out their ceremonies and they took the Virgin of Guadalupe [image] that was covered with

blood—because the Huicholes bathe Christ in blood, and the Virgin of Guadalupe, too. And all the saints and all, with deer or bull blood.

Martha: ...and the nuns come in and take them away....

Salomón: ... They took the Huicholes' image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and they put in a new one. So the Huicholes came to talk to me, and they asked me to intervene with the church so that they could get their image back and take away the image that the damn nuns brought. If not, they were going to burn the mission down, and kick all the nuns out. So, I had to go talk to the Bishop—there's a bishop for the Huicholes, and the Cora and the Tepehuanos in Jesús María [Nayarit], and the Bishop said no. But there was a padre [priest], father Loera, who the Franciscans had sent to the US to study anthropology.... (He) got involved and managed to get them to return the ... image to the Huicholes and avoided a.... burning down the mission and throwing the nuns out, with accusations and counter accusations. But people in Guadalajara are very mocha (religious), they are cristeros[5] and the Huichol is a cristero region, so I was going to get into big trouble over this. The governor ... complained, too, and guess what? I was thrown out of Nayarit. And from there I went to Michoacán, to Cherán.

Martha: So, once again, because you defended the indigenous, you get in trouble and get thrown out! This is a very nice theme for this interview. I think that yes, it's the story of your life. You won't shut up....

Salomón: I won't shut up, and can't let things go, I can't accept injustice.

Further Reading: There are English and Spanish versions of Dr. Nahmad's Malinowski address and the related Power Point available on the following web site. The Power Point is well illustrated including many of the persons named in this transcript [<http://salomonnahmad.wordpress.com/>].

An Invitation from the Society for Applied Anthropology Oral History Project: Readers are invited to suggest persons to be interviewed for the project to members of the Oral History Committee (Allan Burns, Barbara Rylko- Bauer, Don Stull and John van Willigen). I can be reached at (ant101@uky.edu) or 859.269.8301. Think of the anthropologists that made a difference in places where you live and work. Often the person making the suggestion is asked to do the interview. The collection of SfAA recorded interviews and transcripts is archived at the Louie B. Nunn Center for Oral

History at the University of Kentucky Library. Their url is:

http://www.uky.edu/Libraries/libpage.php?lweb_id=11&llib_id=13

Recently, interviews have been done with Tom Weaver, Ted Downing, Robert Wulff, Niel Tashima, Cathleen Crain, Linda Whiteford, and Nancie Gonzalez. –John van Willigen.

Endnotes:

1. Valencia Rojas, Alberto Javier. 2009. Migración Indígena, Etnicidad y Multiculturalidad: El Referente Actual de los Pueblos Indígenas. A la memoria de Margarita Nolasco. México: UNAM.
http://www.nacionmulticultural.unam.mx/Portal/Central/EDITORIAL/pdfs/090403_MARGARITANolasco.pdf.
2. Instituto Nacional Indigenista, the Mexican government's indigenous institute, now, CDI (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas).
3. A plachiquero extracts the aguamiel from the maguey (agave) plant so it can be fermented and turned into pulque.
4. The Fondo de Fomento Ejidal was a government trust that deposited payment for the sale of resources in community accounts.
5. The Cristero movement was a civil war carried out by the church and its supporters in the post revolutionary period in Mexico to resist the new secular laws of the Mexican state.