

Profiles of a Summer in the Sun: Kentucky Professors Study in Oaxaca, Mexico -----

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Each year the National Endowment for the Humanities sponsors a series of summer institutes for college professors. These institutes provide intensive, collaborative study of text, topics, and ideas central to undergraduate teaching in the humanities. Among the summer 2007 offerings was a month-long institute funded by the NEH and sponsored by the Community College Humanities Association entitled "Oaxaca: Crossroads of a Continent." It provided a professional development opportunity for twenty-four faculty fellows from a variety of disciplines in both two-year and four-year colleges and universities and took place in Oaxaca, Mexico, from July 1-July 31. Its aim was to highlight an often overlooked region of the Americas where some of the most important transformations in human history have taken place. Most people are familiar with the Inca, Maya, and Aztec civilizations, but far fewer are cognizant of the Zapotec and Mixtec civilizations which arose, flourished, and declined in southern Mexico at about the same time as the better known indigenous cultures. Descendents of the early Zapotecs and Mixtecs still maintain their languages and culture in the state of Oaxaca.

Two faculty members from Kentucky were among the twenty-four chosen participants, Dr. Phyllis Passariello, Matton Professor of Anthropology at Centre College in Danville, and Dr. Katherine Thomas, Professor and Chair of the Humanities Division at Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College in Cumberland. Armed with the seven texts and 1800 pages of supplemental readings as background for the institute, the intrepid duo arrived in Oaxaca on July 1. The opening lectures and tours provided insights into the museum treasures of Oaxaca, both the larger regional museum at Santo Domingo Cultural Center which houses the rich findings of Monte Alban's fabulous



Tomb 7, and the small community museums which document the rich cultural



traditions of the indigenous *pueblos* in the valleys of Oaxaca. Under the leadership of Selma Holo, Director of the Fisher Gallery and the International Museum of the Institute of the University of California, we learned to judge the relative merits of a variety of display approaches.

Next, the renowned archeologist Marcus Winter led us through 12,000 years of the archeological record in Oaxaca. The Paleo-Indians first arrived in the area about 10,000 BC; living first as hunters and gathers, they slowly developed a settled agricultural life, domesticating first squash, then beans, then corn. Alejandro de Avila, director of the ethnobotanical garden at the Santo Domingo Cultural Center, showed participants how agriculture developed over time, as well as what is now grown and eaten in the area. He explained and illustrated the great biodiversity of Oaxaca due to having species migrate from both North and South America as well as its own unique flora.



Dr. Winter conducted participants through many archeological sites in the area from San José Mogoté, the first town in the valley, to Monte Alban, founded in 500 BC and becoming the largest ceremonial center in the valley with dozens of temple-patio-altar complexes, elite homes, a ball court, and numerous burials, to Mitla, the best preserved site since it was still in use when the Spanish arrived in 1521. Dr. Winter, an archeologist with the *Instituto Nacional de Arqueología e Historia* who has excavated at many sites in the valley, also took us behind the scenes to the conservators' laboratories housed in a

former colonial convent in Cuilapán.

We were thrilled to actually handle an ancient Clovis point used to hunt the megafauna of prehistoric Oaxaca, one of only three found in the area, and fragile pottery shards spanning well over a thousand years from 500 BC to the postclassic around 1200 AD. We were amazed to learn to recognize

archeological mounds still uninvestigated which spread throughout the valleys and to discover ancient potter shards and worked chert lying on the surface of many of the archeological sites. Each year at plowing time, farmers still unearth stone and pottery relics of a bygone age.

Turning to contemporary life in the state of Oaxaca, we learned about the town of Hautla in the far northwest of the state, an area called the Mazateca, after its spoken language, Mazatec. Anthropologist Ben Feinberg of Warren Wilson College, who has spent about 20 years compiling ethnography of the area, filled us in on several dimensions of the local culture. There are interesting complexities to spoken Mazatec, a tonal language. Many individual words have four different “tones” of pronunciation, each of which profoundly changes the meaning of the word. Further, Mazatec speakers also have a curious “whistle speech” which is a very complete form of long distance communication!

In popular culture, Hautla is famous for its local *curandera*, a curer of shaman, named María Sabina, who died in 1985 at the age of 91 but whose legend remains strong. María Sabina was a revered religious woman considered to be talented not only as a curer but also as a poet who chanted prayer/poems as part of her medico-religious practice. Another aspect of her medicine involved the ingestion of so-called “magic mushrooms,” hence her continuing notoriety among the international youth community. Tee shirts with her image are a very common souvenir of Oaxaca.

Our next scholar was the noted art historian, John Pohl, who recently moved from Princeton University to become curator of the Los Angeles Museum of Art. Pohl is an expert on ancient writing systems of the New World, concentrating on the ancient Mixtec and Zapotec cultures of Oaxaca. After giving us an overview of the development of writing, or more accurately, the visual language of Mexico, Pohl zeroed in on one ancient “book” of Mixtec origin, the *Codex Nuttall*. This book is actually a screen fold of animal skins and bark paper coated with a fine lime plaster upon which are hand-painted polychrome images, the Mixtec visual language, dating to around AD 700, the end of the Classic and beginning of the Post-Classic era. Each fellow in the group had his/her own paperback facsimile of the *Codex Nuttall*, and, to our amazement, Pohl fulfilled his initial claim of teaching us to read the Mixtec book!

A truly memorable part of our time in Oaxaca was a three-day fieldtrip to the Mixteca Alta (the mountainous Mixtec area of central Oaxaca) where John Pohl guided us to several rather obscure archaeological sites, as well as to still surviving villages. Nearly all of these locations were precisely the places we had read about in the *Codex Nuttall*. It was quite thrilling to have read the story of the lives of Lord 8 Deer and Lady 6 Monkey just days before and then

to be standing on the very ground where they had stood. It was the epitome of experiential learning.

Another anthropologist, John Monaghan of the University of Illinois at Chicago, accompanied us to the Mixteca Alta since his fieldwork had taken place in contemporary villages of the area. We visited several different places, including the central market town, Tlaxiaco, where we stayed, as well as other colorful and vital *pueblos*, including Nochixtlan and Huahuapan. In the classroom, Monaghan gave us a general overview of Mesoamerican religion, then helped us to see the connections between ancient practices and contemporary behaviors such as rituals of renewal, exchange, and even sacrifice, illustrating, in several instances, syncretism of indigenous and Spanish Catholic traditions.

We completed the institute by studying and visiting a number of modern indigenous towns in the state led by cultural anthropology specialists. Howard Campbell from the University of Texas at El Paso guided us through Juchitán in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec where the Zapotecs have been politically active in fighting for indigenous rights. They have an active intellectual life of writing and poetry in Zapotec and Spanish. The strong women of Juchitán, dressed in their traditional long skirts and beautifully embroidered *huipiles* take an active role in politics and in the marketplace. We enjoyed a coastal treat of a seafood banquet of crab, shrimp, conch, and fish.

The craft pueblos closer to the city of Oaxaca are not as politically and intellectually active as Juchitán. Each of those we visited is economically dependent on a single traditional craft. Teotitlán and Santa Ana del Valle are weaving villages, San Bartolo Coyotepec produces the famous black pottery of Oaxaca, and Arrazola houses artisans who make *alebrijes*, the fancifully painted animals carved from copal wood. Unfortunately, all these villages are suffering from the great decrease in

the number of tourists venturing into the area. Tourism is down almost 70% after two summers of real and threatened violence by striking teachers and the *Asemblea Popular de los Pueblos de Oaxaca* (APPO). During our stay the group tried to take over the Guelaguetza stadium where the famous indigenous dances are performed the last two



Mondays in July. Tear gas wafted down to our usual meeting place, but we were traveling that day and missed the excitement.



At Teotitlán we learned about the process of dying wool from Francisco, a distinguished weaver and dyer. We laboriously climbed a steep hill to view Porfirio weaving on the town's largest (four meter) loom. At San Bartolo we saw a demonstration of pottery making and were amazed at the dexterity of the potter as he hand built a pitcher without even a wheel. All the work of the weavers and potters is done without electricity. Although all the towns have electricity, both crafts and cooking are done traditionally by hand and over wood fires. We were amazed at the labor and skill that went into these beautiful crafts.

At the start of our last week of study, Howard Campbell, our Juchitan guide mentioned above, who is also an expert on political ethnicity, at our request, spoke to us "unofficially" about the on-going political crisis in Oaxaca. During our stay, we could not avoid witnessing marches and speeches related to the struggle. Needless to say, there is no easy explanation to these complex historical conflicts, but it was certainly educational to observe the dynamic situation *in situ*.

In the closing days of the Institute, economic anthropologist Jeffrey Cohen, of Ohio State University, explained current immigration issues involving Oaxacans, not only generally but also specifically, focusing on communities in California, including Santa Monica. He reported to us details of a study he completed about migration from 12 communities in Oaxaca's central valley. In most of these communities, migration affected up to 60% of households, weakening the classic model of the "closed corporate community" which these villages had historically embodied. Since heavy migration is still fairly recent, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions at this time. Yet it is interesting to contemplate the formulation worldwide, (or not...), of trans-national identities. An important aspect of the Institute, of course, was the daily interaction among the fellow and the scholars with each other and with the local inhabitants and their culture. Many academic liaisons and new friendships were forged in Oaxaca. Whether sampling a variety of local *mole* sauces or strolling through the fascinating and always buzzing town square, the *zocalo*, to take in the artistic, if flamboyant, graffiti or bargaining good-naturedly for a rug with the charming daughter of a local weaving family, everyone involved was immersed in a new world. Oaxaca has new meaning in our lives, and the rhizomes planted have only begun to flower. The NEH Summer Institute program provided truly

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worthwhile learning adventures to its fortunate participants which will enrich both our personal and our academic lives.

