

## Oaxaca, a Pre-Pandemic Essay

*Which other people net flying ants at night or gather the eggs from the nests of wasps to flavor their special salsas?*

This new year brought upon me a truly Melvillian “damp, drizzly November in my soul.” The gloom did not improve. Seattle saw 28 days of rain in January. I retreated to my study and escaped into two travel narratives about Mexico: the delightful *Oaxaca Journal* by Oliver Sacks and *On the Plain of Snakes (Coixtlahuaca, in the Aztec Nahuatl)*, perhaps the best book yet by Paul Theroux. My winter depression was acute, and I knew from experience that I needed a jolt to my emotional state and that the best elixir would be a journey to a land of a foreign culture – a *very* foreign culture. In the words of Sybille Bedford in *A Sudden View*, “I had a great longing to move, to hear another language, to eat new food; to be in a country with a long nasty history in the past, and as little present history as possible.” *Nasty*, that most tortuous history is best described by Rebecca West as a “historic oddity of insurrections by a subject people on the side of stability and tradition.” I had promised myself a sojourn after enduring a most exasperating college application process with my 17-year-old daughter. Sacks convinced me to go; Theroux confirmed Sacks; Bedford put the desire into words. I would return to Oaxaca in southern Mexico after a 40-year hiatus.

On New Year’s Eve in 1980, I drove the arduous mountain journey across the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca from Puebla to Oaxaca City. Honestly, having forgotten that it was a holiday yet knowing that the best of every Mexican city or town is at the main square, I ventured directly to the Zocalo of Oaxaca. This central plaza, with an elegant park of enormous Banyan trees, complete with an ornate cast-iron work bandstand, is bordered on the east and west by deep sidewalk cafes. What should not have been surprising was that the cafes would be full of revelers enjoying their last meal of the year. But what was extraordinary was that the green stone-paved, pedestrianized streets fronting the cafes would be knee-deep in broken crockery. I knew not the tradition that one should enjoy their last meal of the year and then throw the year out with the plate, no matter its shatter. This was my introduction to the high culture of Oaxaca.<sup>1</sup> The city has never failed to exhilarate.

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<sup>1</sup> From the Aztec Nahuatl language: *Huaxyácac* – place of the acacias (*huajes* or *guajes*), a species of tree in the mimosa family found throughout the central valleys. *Oaxaquenos* eat the roasted seeds with salt. Or in a sauce, *salsa de guajes*. The Spanish colonialists rejected the more descriptive Aztec place name and renamed the city that they established here Antequera Verde after the city in Andalusia and the native green cantera stone from which their streets were paved and their buildings erected.

What I sought in 2020 was a sort of perfection, a perfect place to live and enjoy life and culture. What were my criteria? First, as an inveterate flaneur, I wanted a walkable city where I would not have to drive a car. Central, colonial Oaxaca is about a mile and a quarter, or 2 kilometers, square. The city is laid out in an almost perfect grid pattern. The cut-stone cobbled streets are narrow, crossed easily by pedestrians at only three lanes in width, one for parking and one for bus and taxi stopping and one for moving traffic. Theroux: “Because traffic is slowed to a crawl by the narrow streets, most people walk.” The obesity rate is much lower here than elsewhere in North America. “A city of pedestrians moves at a human pace in other respects, too, and is inevitably a place where small details are more visible, and noticed and appreciated. Strollers see more.” City blocks are square, about 100 meters a side, with the buildings fronting directly on the sidewalks, leaving the center of the blocks open to multiple gardens and arcaded courtyard patios open to the sky.<sup>2</sup> Check number one off the list for perfection.

Moreover, I wished to walk no more than two blocks in order to find a cafe or a restaurant. There seem to be at least a couple of places to eat for each side of just about every block. I wished to find parks and open squares. Oaxaca boasts many open spaces with tree-shaded benches for respite and contemplation. Could I enjoy the tranquility of fountains? Yes, everywhere. I yearned for live music. In Oaxaca, music is omnipresent, from street side organ playing or violin buskers to hip jazz, salsa, and blues clubs to free state orchestra *Zocalo* concerts to marimba, mariachi, guitar, and every other kind of band playing in parks or plazas or at any number of restaurants. In the center of *El Centro* is the ornate opera house, *Teatro Macedonia Alcalá*, with at least one concert or opera a week, 90 percent of them free. Arrive early, and you are as welcome to a private box as any other early attendees.

Ready access to art and culture as exhibited in museums and galleries? Oaxaca has nine art museums. Several museums feature pre-Hispanic art with sculptures and pottery as old as 3,500 years and as abstract and unconventional as what you might find in the several contemporary art museums of Oaxaca today. The expansive Oaxaca State Museum is set in

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<sup>2</sup> The clever grid centers upon a meridian north-south street intersected by the latitudinal *Avenida de la Independencia*. The resultant cross divides the city into 4 quadrants. All but 3 street names change as they intersect the cross: *Independencia* and the first parallel to the south, Miguel Hidalgo and to the north, Morelos. Building numbers emanate outwards from the cross streets. Knowing this system makes it simple to find one’s location. Moreover, one can easily calculate the distance from the center: simply view the building numbers at an intersection of streets and one knows pretty much exactly how many meters one is located from the center. For example, a building number of 802 means that you are just beyond 800 meters from one of the 2 cross streets. Find a cross street nearby and locate a number on a building. Sum the meters to find close to the exact distance from the center. There are mountainous hills to the north, visible from every street running north/south. If you are walking towards the mountain and the numbers are growing then you are in one of the 2 northern quadrants. Now find a cross street and walk east. If the numbers are decreasing, you are in the northwest quadrant. Oaxaca was laid out by the master planner Alonso Garcia Bravo who previously planned the Mexico City Street grid. The right-angled square block city grid pattern originated with the Romans.

the large 16th-century ex-convento<sup>3</sup> of *Santo Domingo*. There are 9 other specialty museums including those for contemporary painters and other art, a textile museum, a philatelic museum, a children's museum, a museum exhibiting native dress, a museum dedicated to railcars, and a museum just for the city, among others. There are 30 formal art galleries and several others that just seem to pop up in unsuspected neighborhoods. These museums and galleries are challenging and yank you straight out of the present into places you cannot imagine.

However, one does not need to visit a gallery or museum to experience art. Truly the City of Art, one can't escape it. Art is everywhere. I believe that Oaxaqueños wake up every day thinking about art and live, breathe, and practice art in every moment of their lives. Every foyer, every hallway, every café, restaurant, or business establishment of any kind is redolent with the decorated, curated work of an artist – in every little arrangement of a place setting or a floral display (flowers are available in profusion year-round.) To walk the streets is to visit a series of artworks. The low-masonry buildings are mostly faced with adobe. When in need of fresh plaster or repainting, teams of mostly unpaid artists are engaged to choose a base color and then in the evening (they have day jobs) attack the wall(a)murals of exquisite taste, often humorous, sometimes celestial, in-your-face political, always of the best quality and thought-provoking, even surreal or historical, forever challenging.

I neglect the xylographic arts. Think William Blake woodcuts. Oaxaca has replaced the city of Kyoto, Japan, as the premier city of prints and posters produced from carved blocks of wood. The print shops have purchased 19th-century cast-iron presses from Paris and other European arts capitols to print limited editions of imaginatively designed compositions. They are sold for a small fraction of their value in small studios throughout town, some offering classes. Some of the artists are of world renown, exhibiting their work in the galleries of the richest metropolises. Two of my favorites are Mario Guzman and Irving Herrera. Many designs wind up as posters shared freely with an engaged populous, plastered on blank walls throughout the city. There are no absent-minded flaneurs strolling the streets of Oaxaca.

My desire was to live in a masonry city of architectural quality, of stone, brick, and/or adobe-faced masonry. The entire center of the city is a UNESCO World Heritage site, protected from intrusions of both garish and bland modernism. Theroux: “The sanctions against bulldozing the classic architecture of Oaxaca and making room for resorts have kept the town's soul intact. Not many cities in Mexico can say that; not many cities in the world. Oaxaca is remarkable for having resisted modernization – a great impulse for any venerable

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<sup>3</sup> An ex-convento is not an ex-convent or an ex-monastery. It is best translated as a defunct residence built for Spanish Catholic friars. The conventos were always attached to the side of a church and had a square plan that incorporated sleeping rooms to the outside with cloistered walkways surrounding either a stone paved or garden patio at the center. The walkways were, for the most part, vaulted, two stories, and arcaded, at least on the 1st story.

city – and for valuing its cultural heritage.” There is not a single frame building in the center of Oaxaca. The home of Renaissance, as well as unique Churrigueresque and Plateresque *retablo* facades, are part of a unique architecture known as Oaxacan Baroque; this city is filled with a score of 16th and 17th century stone churches, convents, and monasteries. Add another score in the valleys of Oaxaca State. The massive and grand Santo Domingo Church is perhaps the finest example of Dominican architecture in all of Mexico. Add thirty elaborate stone “Casas” or mansions, magnificent city and state government palaces and just hundreds of stone and adobe facades hiding wonderful arched and arcaded interior courtyards and gardens.

Oaxaca is in earthquake country and the architects learned to erect their structures with massively thick walls that demand clever door and window openings. From Aldous Huxley, in his “Beyond the Mexique Bay”, “In spite of three major earthquakes, in spite of seven sieges, including one by the French army under Bazaine (for Napoleon III), in spite, above all, of four centuries of Mexican existence, Oaxaca remains a stately city, full of impressive buildings. Santo Domingo has been repeatedly pillaged, but is still, none the less, one of the most extravagantly gorgeous churches in the world.”

French bakeries and pastry shops? I was quite surprised to find one every few blocks, often one every block, croissants everywhere. One French bakery, Boulenc, bakes baguettes that rival the best in Paris. One espresso shop offered me a choice of five different beans for my cappuccino.

Yes, I wanted to dine gourmet. Yes, Oaxaca is truly affordable. Enjoy four-course, mid-day *Comida Corridas* (literally “meals on the run” prix fixes) meals in an elegant setting for less than \$6, as little as \$3 for establishments with slightly less ambiance. Menus include cold drinks of unlimited fruit-flavored aguas del dia, including such offerings as *Jugo de Jamaica*, made from dried hibiscus flower, and *horchata*, made from rice and cinnamon. Served everywhere, *tejate* “is made with toasted corn, fermented cacao beans, *pixtle* (toasted and ground mamey pits), and cacao flowers, which are ground into a paste that's mixed with water and stirred by hand into a smooth mixture. It's a frothy, nutritious beverage that's drunk naturally with ice or some added sugar.” Oaxaca boasts what Rebecca West calls “cotton-wooly tortillas stuffed with the clotted heaven of avocado-pear puree.” This is the land of seven *moles*, wonderful sauces that have as many as 20 ingredients and take hours to prepare. Like Paris, sauce is king, mole especially, whether served vegetarian with squash or with pork, beef, poultry, fish, goat, or even armadillo. This is the land of the largest baked corn tortilla, spread with *asiento* (lard), then a kind of bean paste, perhaps beans and avocado, shredded vegetables, maybe *tasajo* – thin strips of grilled beef, yet always *quesillo* Oaxacan string cheese to make a *tlayuda* that is folded like a quesadilla as it is cooked on the traditional *comal*.

For *Comida Corridas* the first course *sopas* (soups) are either pureed *cremas* (creams), *caldos* (broths) or pasta. 2<sup>nd</sup> courses are salads or vegetables and the main courses generally offer a choice of at least three meats or fish and are almost always served with a complex

sauce and often with rice, always with tortillas and/or bread included. Desserts are appropriately sized given the plentiful meal, more of a sweetened after-dinner *amuse bouche* than a full-blown course. Creamed gelatins are popular, made with chunks of real fruit and vegetables. Often desserts are small slices of cakes and pies. One pie I ate was a puree with a crumb crust open to a small scoop of whipped cream. As it was delicious, I inquired as to its nature. Pureed *chapuline* grasshopper. Oliver Sacks on eating grasshoppers (locustaphagy) in Oaxaca: “Of the many foods I have eaten in Oaxaca, the grasshoppers have pleased me especially – crunchy, nutty, tasty and nutritious.”<sup>4</sup> Another creamed dessert was served with a cup of espresso. When I pointed out to the waiter that I had not ordered the coffee, he said that of course I had, for I had ordered the *Comida Corrida* and it included the dessert with espresso, for this dessert is *always* served with espresso. Squash is popular and zucchini common. The summer squash *calabacita* served in soups or as sides is prevalent. *Calabacita*'s parent *calabaza* pumpkins make a wonderful pureed soup, similar to the cream of watermelon. At *Casa Crespo* one can order *caldo de piedra*, a fish and/or shrimp stew that is boiled by the addition of super-heated stones.

Of course, one can buy delicious tacos or tiny *tlacoyos* or open-faced *memelas* or larger *huaraches* and *pambazos* and other traditional Méxican dishes with Oaxacan flair everywhere. The tortas were like soft bread *tlayuda* pizzas with the avocado sides pressed down on the *comal*. I had no idea that grilled avocados were so delicious. *Marquésitas* are very thin waffles heavily pressed on enormous, long-handled waffle irons and when cooked, lifted gently from the irons and rolled around ingredients like Nutella or my favorite – a banana sliced lengthwise with strawberries. Often, I only ate a bowl of *pozole* for dinner. Even the *chica* portion I could rarely finish. Most importantly, with up to seventeen ingredients, entrees come with the ubiquitous *mole* sauces, one of seven varieties, some with chocolate and often identified by color. Chocolate is made fresh from cacao beans on almost every block. One can choose sugar flavored or bitter, with almonds or milk, fresh cinnamon or not. Oaxaqueños seem to drink at least one bowl of hot chocolate a day, often served with a brioche-like egg bread for dipping.

Spicy food is described as *pico*, not *picante*, never really hot. I am informed there is no reason to burn taste buds when the chefs work so hard to bring out the flavors. I read that “nowhere else in México will you find more kinds of chiles,” and Oaxacan cuisine shows them off in dish after dish. The most famous chili is the smoky *pasilla Oaxaqueño*, grown only in the *Mixe* region but common in Oaxacan salsas. Other dishes rely on more obscure varieties, like *chihuacle*, which comes in three colors: *amarillo*, *negro*, and *rojo*. Oaxacan cuisine is the most complex and deserves a more robust description than in the paragraphs written here. Often, I had to refer to my Dianne Kennedy cookbook, “Oaxaca al Gusto,” just to identify what was on the menu. One example: Consulting Kennedy, I discovered that the *Salsas*

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<sup>4</sup> More from Oliver Sacks: “Grasshoppers, by a special biblical dispensation, are kosher, unlike most invertebrates. (Did not John the Baptist live on locusts and wild honey?)”

described as *molcajete y tejolote* have the best flavors are released when their ingredients are crushed in the *molcajete y tejolote* (volcanic rock mortar and pestle) rather than processed in a blender. A couple of the *molcajete y tejolote salsa* delicacies available only in Oaxaca are *salsa de chichatanas*. *Chichatanas* are night-netted flying ants, and *salsa de panal* is made from the part of wasp's nests that contain the insect's eggs.

Do not turn up your nose because if you do visit Oaxaca you may very well be lucky enough to be served one of these dishes in a *comida corrida*. Why else would the Oaxaqueño chefs go to such lengths to gather these ingredients? Of course, the faint of heart may wish to avoid the *criadillas* - lamb testicles, or the *machitos* (grilled goat intestines) or *gusanos rojos* - red worms that are fried or folded into a taco.

Add to my wish list for an optimum place in which to live - accessible and inexpensive public transportation. Taxis are abundant and easily hailed. Uber is banned. Fares are \$2 to \$2.50 for any destination in *El Centro*, with no extra charge for more than one passenger, and tipping is completely unknown. City buses cost 40 U.S. cents, and all of them travel deep into the suburbs for one price. I delighted in the skill of the drivers, manual shifting gears and darting around traffic, all while making change. Traffic was intense but only jammed up when there was a political *manifestation* (demonstration), often a wholesale blockading of streets. As there are no political parties in Oaxaca, democratic protest in Oaxaca is a local, immediate, traditional way to redress grievances, is respected by the public and the authorities, and is supported by the middle classes. A demonstration seems to occur about once every three days.

How does a civilized populous handle heavy traffic? Although the streets are narrow, there is only one boulevard, the six-lane *periferico* kept peripheral to the center so as to maintain the city's architectural and cultural integrity. Traffic moves, albeit often just a tad quicker than a safe walker's stride. What facilitates the continuous movement of the traffic is that the streets are one-way and alternate in direction. Drivers have to look in only one direction for cross traffic. There are no stop signs and hardly any traffic lights. The city has been removing stoplights in order to speed up traffic, and it has worked. The philosophy is described as "one by one". There is a tacit courtesy practiced by the drivers as well as the pedestrians. Honking horns are rare. If pedestrians had a wholesale right of way, then traffic would go into gridlock. Everyone gets their turn. I found this sense of traffic equality, this tacit sense that all needed to be able to progress, remarkably equitable.

Traveling outside the city in dedicated multi-passenger taxi *collectivos* cost as little as \$1.25 for a distance of 50 miles or more; 2<sup>nd</sup> class buses cost the same. More distant villages are serviced by new 15-passenger Mercedes bus vans complete with large flat-screen TV displays showing current films – often Bollywood dubbed into Spanish. What do they cost? As little as \$3-\$4 for 50 miles or more. Three-wheeled, three-passenger moto-cyclo *tuk-tuks* putt across outlining towns for 50 or fewer cents. I could just thrust myself upon the world

with an intended destination and be dropped at a *crucero* (crossroads) where there was usually a taxi *colectivo* or tuk-tuk waiting. And further my journey without worrisome wait.

Inexpensive accommodations? My private bathroom-suited bedroom in Hostel Don Nino was \$30 a night. The hostel management staff was extremely helpful in recommending distant Central Valley sites and the transportation thereto, particularly the most knowledgeable and enthusiastic bi-lingual guide and gentlemanly hotel clerk. My room fronted a garden with a banana tree and other exotic plants that attracted a chorus of Mynah Birds, Cave Swallows, and Clay-colored Thrushes that woke me with the sunshine every morning. I could have whatever I wished for breakfast for \$3 U.S. dollars, including coffee and a fresh fruit plate. The hostel restaurant served delicious three-course lunches and early dinners for \$3. Often, when I woke up, I could not wait to get outside to enjoy the city. I drank a coffee with an elegantly presented and plentiful fruit plate of melon, papaya, sliced apple, and banana doused with yogurt and sprinkled with granola and could thus energetically could enjoy the al fresco morning sun. The underrated English travel writer Sybille Bedford: “Mornings in México are always serene. The young blue air floats lightly upon the arid land and one is lofted along with the empyrean balloon.” Perhaps the least lugubrious book written by D.H. Lawrence was written while in Oaxaca - his “Mornings in México.” I strolled through the three-hectare, fountained *Juarez del Llano* (the plain) Park fronting the Hostel dining room to my favorite French bakery to finish my breakfast with a fresh pastry (usually a *manzanita* (apple) or *durazno* (peach) tarte, on a park bench accompanied by the songs of tropical birds.

Any purity of perfection certainly requires good weather. The February mornings were generally 50 to 55 degrees for a daily low, never below 47 or above 56. Around the solar noon of 12 to 3 in the afternoon, the temperature climbed to 80 and 85 for those pleasant moments when all is wonderful. Never did the gauge find itself above 90, and only once was the day’s high below 80. Add to the quality of the weather extremely low humidity at the hottest time of the day and high humidity in the early morning to abate the chill. Supreme. I sought the sun in the morning and the shade in the afternoon and dappled light otherwise. More from Bedford on the climate: “In the morning we are on the coast of New England. It is Autumn. A golden late September; the air is brisk but informed with warmth, luminous with sun. The kind of morning when one cannot bear to be in bed...At eleven, the climate becomes continental. It is the height of summer on the top of a mountain. The sun is burning, brilliant...the *fond de l’air* cool and flowing like water. One feels tremendously exhilarated, charged with energy. This is the time of day when I like to pick my way through the streets, walk slowly across the Cathedral Square under the shade of the brim of my hat. The full noon lasts several hours...later, it is a spring evening: mild, tenuous, nostalgic”.

What could be more welcome than the English language, 20,000-volume Oaxacan Lending Library, a philanthropic organization that supports 60 other libraries throughout the state. This is the social center for the English-speaking community with at least two

community events a day including thrice weekly yoga, weekly bridge, lectures from retired professors on a plethora of subjects, organized tours, bike rides and hikes in the mountains and valleys, an organ festival, just too many events to mention. One can make more interesting friends at the library in one week than in Seattle in a year. Supplementing the library, the city offered an English-language bookstore, Amate, named after the tree that provided the bark that the Amerindians used for their writings.

One early Saturday morning, I stumbled upon a group of birders. There are nearly 800 avian species in Oaxaca, the most of any state in México. One early morning brought large parrots to El Llano. I am encouraged to travel back to the state if only to learn the birds and identify their calls, plumage, and habits.

In Oaxaca are many plants that I had never seen before. Such a delight to see flaming pink Jacaranda trees in full blossom in February, the month of tree flowering. Oaxaca sits astride the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel from the equator but, at 5,000 feet, enjoys temperate weather.

More than anywhere else on earth, grow more than 690 ferns in Oaxaca State. This drew amateur pteridologist Oliver Sacks (and famous neurologist) with the New York Botanical Garden's chapter of the American Fern Society to Oaxaca, their excursion the subject of his journal. The mountains that surround the valleys of Oaxaca make for diverse climates, including cool tropical rain forests with constant 90-plus percent humidities necessary for a select group of species to survive. I journeyed up to Cuajimoloyas in the Sierra Norte at 10,000 feet, featuring the genus *psylocybe hongos*, or magic mushrooms, for which a festival is held when they are ripe for picking in the summer. A special *Pino/Moctezuma (pochote)/Encino* (Moctezuma Pine/Oak) forest predominates. From Sacks, I learned that "most of the oaks are in such an active state of evolution that they cannot be identified. Some floras speak of thirty species, some of two hundred – and these hybridize constantly." Enormous two-meter-tall agave also thrive in this environ.

But I neglect the cacti and the succulents! On the grounds of the Santo Domingo Church and ex-Convento is the 6-acre Ethnobotanical Garden. The plants that grow here have such botanical value that they can only be viewed on a 2-hour guided tour. Why the name Ethnobotanical? The garden documents the more than 2,000 domesticated plants the indigenous people have cultivated for as many as 8,000 years, including scores of corn plants, 37 kinds of peppers, and the nopal cactus with their strawberry-like fruit. The Nopal harbors cochineal aphids that, carefully gathered, cleaned, and crushed, produce the most radiant red dye. This export made the Oaxacan Spanish overlords rich, as no synthetic red dye was invented for hundreds of years. Think British Red Coats. More valuable than gold, at 154,000 insects per kilo every year, the Spanish exported 4,000 metric tons of the dye to Europe for centuries. Imagine the intensity of the labor.



To the east of the city is a Bald Cypress tree, Et Tule, in the same family as the giant sequoias and redwoods. The tree is at least 2,000 years old and, at 140 feet, has the largest girth of any tree on earth. An enormous specimen, it simply dwarfs the large church in its shadow. In Sybille Bedford's semi-autobiographical novel about México titled "A Visit to Don Otavio," she visited the site. When her companion expressed no interest in getting out of the car to see the tree, she was told, "You need not...this forest we are under, is *it*." It is rumored that in 1803, world explorer and naturalist Alexander Von Humboldt made a side trip here on his exploration of México solely to examine this most extraordinary plant. From *El Llano* Park, Humboldt Street journeys west one block south of the delightful Conzatti Park, named after the amateur Italian-México botanist and pteridologist who successfully documented 600 new fern species in México.

Oaxaca City is at the crossing of three fertile valleys: *Tlacolula* to the east, *Zaachila-Zimatlan* to the South and *Etla* to the North, with side valleys off in several directions. Mountains tower over the valleys. The highest peak in the state is 12,000 feet. This is not Kansas. To be able to escape a bustling city and enjoy mountain scenery and climate is high on my list of quality living.

All three valleys feature ancient ruins from several indigenous cultures. Close by Oaxaca City, Monte Alban is the largest and best known. It dates from 500 B.C. Here, the Zapotecs and then the Aztecs leveled a mountain ridge to build a city. Mitla is older and the most religious. In the Tlacolula valley, Mitla was hidden from the Conquistadores for centuries as it was still used for ceremonies after the conquest. The intricate stone mosaics there are otherworldly. Then there are lesser sites in active excavation: *Yagul*, *Lambityeco*, *Dainzu*, *Zaachila*, *Atzompa* and *Mogote*, all of serious archaeological interest.

I like the idea of joining many others of a municipality who speak the official European language, Spanish, as their 2<sup>nd</sup> language, rudimentarily my third. There are at least 16 different indigenous languages spoken in Oaxaca State.<sup>5</sup> There are more than three families of languages spoken here. Contrast that with the Eurasian family of languages that encompasses all but three of the languages that are spoken in all of Europe, the Middle East and near Asia. Zapoteca and Mixteca (Oto-Manguean family) and Mixe (Mixe-Zoquean family) are as foreign to each other as they are to English or Arabic. And English is closer to Arabic than

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<sup>5</sup> Náhuatl - the languages of 1 million speakers throughout central Mexico, Zapoteca - spoken by 400,000 people and has 5 regional dialects, Mixteca - 320,000 speakers and 29 dialects throughout Oaxaca, Guerrero and Puebla, Mazateca - spoken by 150,000 people in Oaxaca, Veracruz and Puebla, Chinanteco - 6 dialectal variants and 77,000 speakers, Mixe - 70,000 speakers and 4 dialects, Amuzgo - spoken in Oaxaca and Guerrero by approximately 20,000 people, Chatino - 20,000 speakers and 3 dialects, Zoque - spoken in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Tabasco by 20,000 speakers; Chicateco - 14,000 speakers; Popoloca - has 12,000 speakers in Puebla and Oaxaca; Chontal - 2 dialects and 10,000 speakers; Huave - 10,000 speakers in southwest Oaxaca; Triqui - 8,000 speakers throughout Oaxaca, Mexico City, Baja California, Sonora and the U.S.; Chocho - 3,000 speakers in Oaxaca and Ixcateco - just 2,000 speakers in Oaxaca."

Zapoteco is to Mixteco. For example, Oto-Manguean languages adopt the verb-subject-object format, whereas Mixe-Zoquean adopt morphologically complex verbs and simple nouns. Philologists tell us that language is culture, and the Oaxaqueño indigenous cultures thankfully still thrive in Oaxaca State and city. These cultures are foremost and forefront in the people and the manner in which they interact with other citizens and foreigners. Theroux: the fact that most of the population are “Indians – Zapotec and Mixtec – deepens the...cultural authority: five hundred years after the (Spanish) conquest – Oaxaca was founded in 1529 – the same indigenous people persist, tenacious and undiluted, still speaking their ancient languages, easily recognizable as México’s native aristocrats, their same hawk-nosed profiles chip-carved on the murals disinterred from the ruins at Monte Alban and Mitla,” and, in the words of the Zapatista leader sub-comandante Marcos, with “skin the color of the earth.”

When I first returned to Oaxaca, I noticed over the first 48 hours after my arrival a transformation. I realized a change in my attitude, sensitivity; a lack of stress, and an emergent sense of tranquility, even amidst the crowds at the markets. In the ensuing 48 hours, I believe that I became more Oaxaqueño, more inclined to solitude, with a strong respect for the detachment of others. After all, the patron saint of Oaxaca City is Our Lady of Solitude. I can only describe this as a measure of silence that befell me, the silent joy and abundant sense of kindness to others I experienced. Oliver Sacks in Oaxaca: “I have had, an odd feeling in the last day or so, which I was hard put to diagnose, and first ascribed to the altitude. It was, I suddenly realized, a feeling of joy, a feeling so unusual I was slow to recognize it. There are many causes for the joyousness, I suspect – the plants, the ruins, the people of Oaxaca – but the sense of this sweet community.” It manifested in how I could sit on a crowded bus and join all the others in silent contemplation. The people have such dignity. If I did speak or ask a question or for a direction or recommendation, I was always greeted with a broad smile, gracious respect, and kindness. But soon thereafter, we fell silent, immersed in pensive musing, a kind of carefree trust. There was no fawning on foreigners as in other parts of México. Malcolm Lowry, the author of “Under the Volcano,” wrote that “the people (of Oaxaca) are lovely and gentle, polite, passionate, profound and true.” On journeys from the city to distant communities, mainly to visit magnificent churches, monasteries and municipal buildings, I threw myself open to this new world. I trusted that these kind people would care for me. I shed my fear. This I attribute to the firm and ever-present nature of the ancient cultures still at play, still extant. Theroux says that “cooperation and mutual aid were the keys to their culture.” The University of Washington Anthropologist Devon G. Pena wrote in *Learning Peacefulness from the Zapotecas*, “The Zapotec are known to rear their children to value ‘respect for elders’ and ‘sharing as a virtue.’ These norms are part of a complex set of practices that produce what scholars call ‘socialization for peace’.” It was as if my American greed and money, materialism and competitiveness were just a transient flavor of the day; that these people, although materially very poor, had an assurance and mindfulness that transcended temporal temptations, “quite unlike our dominant avarice-driven, self-centered,

and neo-Darwinian...banal acquisitiveness” (Pena). Their indigenous culture fosters such poise, such respect for one another, for each other’s soulfulness. It seemed so foreign to my culture and replaced the distrust and fear that America teaches. Pena: “The Zapoteca have experienced some 400+ years of colonialism, racism, land theft, structural violence, and every other imaginable indignity and violent deprivation imposed by outsiders. Amazingly, they continue to socialize their children for peacefulness despite their experience of four centuries of inter-generational historical trauma and structural violence. Despite this suffering, the Zapoteca have persisted because of their culture of resilience which empowers them to refuse being reduced to the detritus of neoliberal capitalism. They are not merely ghosts of ‘primitive accumulation’.”

Yet, as pensive as I found the people, as I journeyed throughout the city and Oaxaca State, I marveled at the colors, the boldness of the colors, the use of color in dress and apron and painted facades and rugs and quilts and products of artisanship of every kind. From Rebecca West’s *Survivors in México*, “What are the characteristics of México? Flowers so bright that they seem to be audible.” It was as if the apparent solemnity of the people was embellished and adorned through the exuberance, the utter explosion, the abundance of color. In the words of Aldous Huxley, “Yes, Oaxaca is a fine place. Fine and, as gaiety is reckoned in the provinces of México, positively gay.”

I learned the Zapotec handshake. When we Americans greet, we shake hands. We show our right hand, palm up with our thumb splayed open, to show that we do not harbor a weapon. In our culture, we fear the stab in the back from the left hand that is not exposed in the right-hand shake. The Zapotec greet one another as the person who first sees the other, i.e., first recognizes the other, holds her right hand vertically, and the thumb closed down upon the first finger. This hand is extended; the other greets with both hands and clasps the former, shaking once down and then up with an ever so slight bow. A broad smile accompanies these gestures. They emote rather than assure.

I remember visiting the market of weaving artisans in Teotitlan Del Valle, a village given over almost exclusively to the weaving of wool; from the raising of the sheep to the shoring, the carding and spinning of the wool, the making of the dyes and soaking of the yarn in the dyes and the looming into intricate designs, never exactly the same, each with a pattern all its own, all of that moment, of that time of expression. I wanted rugs but could not transport them home, so I bought woven wool drink coasters five or so inches by five inches, each with a distinct design. There were several stalls, each with its own proprietor, all competitors. I found two stalls with almost identical goods. The one that had designs perhaps more to my liking brought out my bargaining as this was expected and, more importantly, respected. The proprietor of the stall with the designs that I chose hardly spoke Spanish. And my poor Spanish did not help in the transaction. The neighboring stall seller recognized her neighbor’s language distress and translated my broken Spanish into the native Zapotec, even though this was not

at all in her most narrow economic interest, for she did indeed have the advantage of language. But she translated willingly, out of the generosity natural to her. As I came to an agreement with the Zapotec woman of little Spanish language facility, I felt that I had no choice but to buy an equal number of coasters from each, and we all became friends, and that seemed to transcend the meanness, the selfishness of buying, negotiating, and competition. We were happy with the result, as it should be, and were left smiling and content, me with my souvenirs and they with their sales and friendship intact. And that is how I felt – intact, whole, integral, and able to return to my mindful solitude for the journey back to the city.

Oaxaca is a safe place with honest people who will not steal from you or rob you in the night. Pena: “the Zapotec have some of the lowest crime rates in the world.” Women or vulnerable old men can walk the streets at any hour without fear. No one will knowingly cheat you. If you forget to pick up your change from a purchase even if it is in a large denomination, it will be returned to you. I saw no homeless people. Drug problems did not seem to exist. The beggars are truly grotesque or without legs, worthy. Public drunkenness is nowhere apparent.

Oaxaca is safe, smart, ancient, indigenously cultured, artistic, sophisticated, gourmet, clean, exceedingly affordable with perfect weather and gracious, dignified people of incomparable talents and sensitivity.

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