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FREE

DIA DE LA AZUCENA

By **BONNIE PFISTER**

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lucky are the travelers who land in Oaxaca in late July: *Guelaguetza*, also known as *domingos del Cerro* (Mondays of the Hill), is among the most famous and beloved festivals in Mexico. Indigenas from all over Oaxaca stream into the capitol on July 20 and 26th in traditional garb to make their offerings to the gods with music, performance and a display of handmade wares. The site of most of the action is at an open-air theater in the northwest part of town. Until the 1970's the hill, was called the *rotonda de la Azucena*, the pagoda of the hill white lilly. In days of yore, families would flock to the hill in their new clothes, to picnic and search for the sweet, pungent flower to offer to a loved one. The flower, the essence of *Guelaguetza*, would be placed in a room in the home where all could enjoy in its fragrance. This Zapotec term, described by Evardo Ramirez Bohorquez, a historical chronicler for the city, "is a symbol of their ancestral feeling of mutuality, of community; the product of their region." Ramirez continues romantically,



A strong Zapotec woman in traditional dress

Rich and poor, young and old, women and men of Oaxaca, all, participate in this provincial festival. After lunch we go to the hill to cut white lillies, meet friends, and maybe a sweetheart, to contemplate the beautiful little valley that is the seat of our community; the hill with the incomparable amphitheater of mountains that profile the blue horizon. We savor the fruits of this place, craving sweets and homespun things that all can afford, displaying our new clothes that are nearly always obliged to "take a soaking" by a little impetinent rain. But it completes the splendid afternoon enjoyed up there on the hill.

The festival has evolved numerous times since its beginnings 61 years ago. First a commemoration of conquest, then a familial celebration of *indigena* culture, the current incarnation can be a rather commercialized affair, in which the city fathers capitalize on interest in Oaxaca to feed the tourist boom. The term *Guelaguetza* itself is a public relations coup just five years old. Front row tickets to the once-free festival now fetch N\$ 200. Opt instead for the free seats in the sky-scraping

nosebleed section, or just mingle with the natives, *indigene* or otherwise, as you munch on enormous empanadas and take in the street scene.

The origins of the festival are rooted in colonialism. Then-governor Francisco Lopez Cortez decreed a celebration to be held on April 25, 1932, in honor of the 400th anniversary of Oaxaca's "founding" by conquistadores for Carlos, king of Spain and Germany. For the first time in modern Oaxacan history people came from all over the state in their regional clothing and with their particular customs of celebration. Lopez and the town fathers prepared a program of entertainment and sporting events, with the help of poet/doctor Alfredo Canseco Feraud. Interest in *indigene* culture among *criolles* (those of Spanish blood) and *mezisios* (those of mixed blood) grew with the first Congress of Mexican

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History the following year, and an indigenous festival organized in 1941 by Governor Gen. Vincente Gonzalez Fernandez. It was Governor Gen. Manuel Cabrera Carrasquedo who in 1953 proposed and organized a festival for the third and fourth Mondays in July, calling it *Lunes del Cerro*. The festival was always popular with Oaxaqueños, but in 1988 the government began dubbing the events *Guelaguetza*, and plugging it internationally.

Today you'll see the riot of colorful costumery from seven Oaxacan regions, including the city's valley, the isthmus of Tehuantepec, the coast, the Cañada, the Mixtec region, the Sierra, and the fertile country of Tuxtepec, through which the major river, the Papaloapam, (river of the butterflies) passes to reach the Gulf of Mexico. Catch a glimpse of the pantomimes and dramatizations of such legends as that of Donají, a Mixtec princess in love with a prince from the enemy Nahuatl tribe. Ultimately Donají chose love of her people over him and called the Mixtecs to arms. The Nahuatl captured her and cut off her head, but her body did not decompose. When her lover found her corpse, lilies of the valley were growing from her ear. (Donají is now a symbol of regional pride and appears on the Oaxaca state seal.) You might see a re-enactment of the sacrifice of a virgin to the pagan god of fertility, Centeocihuatl, or in a nod to all the hard work of those Catholic missionaries, a devotion to the Virgin of Monte Carmelo. And look for dances inspired by the pre-Columbian past representing the wedding of Consijoeza, the last Zapotec king.



A Huastlan woman dressed for the Guelaguetza

However, as you take in this festival that is as full of texture and irony as Mexico itself, know that you are joining in the what Oaxaqueños say is the true meaning of Guelaguetza: community.



An indigenous Mixte woman. One of the few indigenous groups never conquered by the Spaniards.

CULTURAL EVENTS

- 11th: Arts Festival- Ciudad de las Canteras - 5 P.M.
- 16th: Religious Festival- Carmen Church, 6th block of Garcia Vigil
- 17-19th: Oaxacan Food Festival - Alameda Park, 12-5 P.M.
- 17 & 24: Parade of Oaxacan Ethnic groups- the main streets of the city 5:00 p.m.
- 18th: Benito Juarez Day Memorial Ceremony in Guelatao, 1 1/2 hrs. from city
- 18-25th: Zapotec Festival, Patio de la Danza, 6 P.M.
- 19-24th: Cultural Events - Alameda Park, 6 P.M.
- 19 & 26: Guelaguetza- Cerro del Fortin, 10 A.M.
- 20th: Modern Dance Concert - Casa de la Cultura, 7 P.M.

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The following excerpt is taken from the article "Marketing Ethnicity" by Lynn Stephen for CULTURAL SURVIVAL QUARTERLY Winter 1992.

Elaborate fiestas mark major Zapotec occasions-- weddings, funerals, housewarmings, even birthdays. Often requiring food for up to 200 for days at a time, many of these secular occasions borrow elements from the religious cult celebration of the local pantheon of saints and virgins. At such times, now confined to two per year instead of the original of the original twenty, a household sponsors a celebration for a saint or virgin and hosts a series of fiestas.

For such events, whether religious or secular, a woman's duties can last for months. First of all, large fiestas require her to recruit and coordinate women to help. Making tortillas, chocolate, rice, beans, bread, tortillas, the women drink tejuete and meals for hundreds of people is no small feat. "Women don't really like to go to fiestas that much because it is a lot of work," explains Cristina Martinez.

"Tejuete is the worst. You have to grind your arms off. Tortillas are bad because the heat. Making them makes my arms hurt and my knees sore."



Dancers from Ejutla in Oaxaca for Lunes del Cerro, circa 1950

Bonds of kinship and ritual kinship-- compadrazgo--are critical to such large events, and the concept of family is broad in Teotitlan. If a woman plans a wedding for a daughter or son, she will call on all the women in her biological family and her husband's family, plus the mothers of all children-- five or more-- to whom she is a godmother. Only with these women as a team can she prepare enough food for the event. In return, each of the women can call on her own for the future. This reciprocal labor exchange is known as guelaguetza. Reciprocal exchanges also include the rice, beans, corn, chocolate, pigs, turkeys, chickens, and pigs for ceremonies.

needed for guelaguetza exchanges," Ana Gonzalez says. "Sometimes men don't know what is needed for big meals."

The Zapotec are extremely organized about reciprocal exchanges. Each household keeps a guelaguetza book to record loans to other households, as well as items they have borrowed-- a sort of checkbook of goods instead of money. If a household loans a turkey, it can later recall a turkey. Planting debts with other people is a way to prepare for future events. Women will plan years in advance what they will need when their children marry.

By and large, women control the reciprocal exchange of both goods and labor. "Sometimes men don't know what is



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During the Summer there are many people offering Spanish courses who are not credentialed instructors, yet they are charging the same rates as credentialed Spanish teachers! Be careful, do not let people fool you. Ask for their credentials and if they don't have them, they should not be charging you the full rate. (The credentialed rate for a group is \$5 to \$7 per hour, and the individual rate would be \$10 to \$15 hour.)

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