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The Zapotec Isthmus

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May is one of the most exciting months of the year in Oaxaca. We celebrate Labor Day on May 1, and Holy Cross Day on May 3rd. This commemorates the discovery by St. Helena, in 326, of the cross on which our lord was crucified. Large crosses are adorned with flowers and honored by special fiestas. We continue with the commemoration of the victory of the Mexican forces over the French army on May 5th, Mother's Day is May 10th and Teacher's Day May 5th. During May there are fiestas held in Tehuantepec, Juchitan, Salina Cruz and Espinal every Saturday until June. These fiestas are called "Mayordomias". A group of people is specially selected to take charge of the organization of the festivities. They will sell their animals, tools and other possessions even though it may mean their financial ruin.

A visitor to Oaxaca is often amazed at the variety of ethnic popu-

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lations coexisting in a relatively small region and impressed by the tenacity with which they've kept their traditions and languages alive.

One of the most remarkable of Oaxaca's 16 ethnic populations stands out because it is run by women - directly against the grain of Mexican machismo. These people occupy the south coast of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico's narrow waist between the Pacific and the Gulf, and are called Tehauztepecans. Visitors lucky enough to be in Oaxaca in April and May have a chance to see manifestations of this unique culture, especially in the velas or festivals, for which they are justly famous.

Mexico has always been quite conservative in social mores and cus-

oms; and the people of Tehuantepec are not much different in that respect. But within that context, Tehuantepecans are Mexico's "liberated women".

While the men stay close to home and tend to many domestic chores, the women of Tehuantepec are out taking care of business, running the affairs of the town, and trading in distant markets. In other Oaxacan communities, the young men are mobile, often leaving to seek work elsewhere. The young women are encouraged to stay home. In Tehuantepec, it's just the opposite.

Another interesting feature of Tehuantepecan culture is an open

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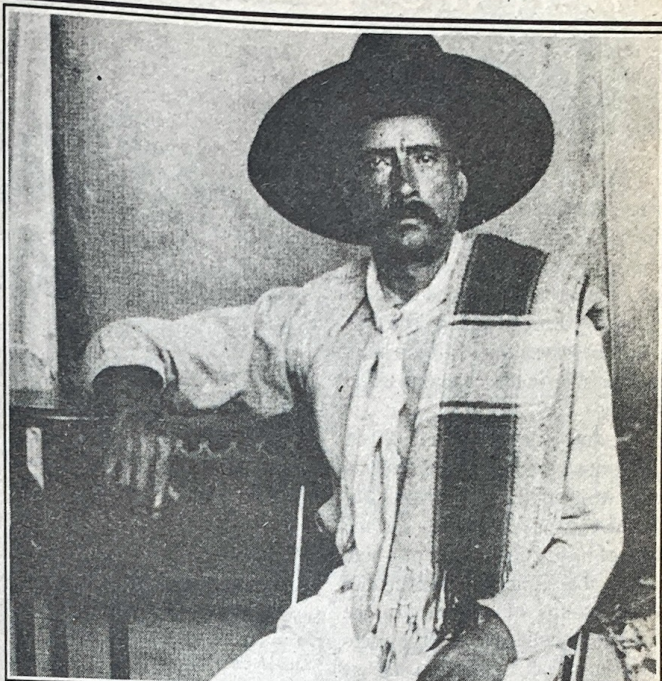
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 acceptance of homosexuality. One of the meanings of Mexican machismo that in this country there is no gay rights movement, no gay pride, and no tolerance for gay life-styles. But in Tehuantepec gay men are not only tolerated, but perhaps even celebrated. A mother may "show off" her gay son to others, and gay men in female clothing are not an unusual sight on the streets.

The women of Tehuantepec are assertive, take charge types, used to getting what they want. If a girl of courtable age has her eye on a man, the common belief is that he doesn't have a chance against her wiles, her charms, or even her magic potions. For that reason, many women of Oaxaca are loathe to see their husbands visit the region on business.

Many tehuantepecan women are accomplished entrepreneurs. In April and May, mangos hit the markets of Oaxaca, brought from Tehuantepec and sold in abundance. If you see an ethnic woman in the marketplace who seems to be more self assured, who sits on occasion "like a man", one leg up on the other, and if she pleasantly cajoles you into buying something chances are she's from Tehuantepec.

The openness and warmth of Tehuantepec affects life in many ways. For example, in the Mexican countryside, if a boy seduces a girl and then drops her, it's a serious matter, and he had better watch his back. In Tehuantepec, he can get off with a modest fine negotiated between the two sets of parents.

The most impressive spectacle of Tehuantepecan life that an outsider can witness is the vela, a festival held to honor a saint, a hero, or a harvest. No one plans a vela more seriously than Tehuantepecans, and no one has more fun once it's under way. Velas are so called after the candles lit in the church in a ceremony which initiates the festivities. After the ceremony



comes the procession, and then an all-night party of eating, drinking, and celebrating, in which the whole town participates.

The procession is a wonder to behold. Oxdrawn wagons are beautifully arranged with trees and flowers, and look like rolling gardens. From them young women throw treats to the crowd. The procession and indeed every detail of the entire vela, is directed by the gushana, a sort of religious sorority invested with the responsibility of carrying on the traditions of the vela and doing it right. These women, pillars of the community, are prominently featured in the procession. They wear long, full dresses of dark velvet meticulously embroidered with bold floral designs making one can take years. They carry baskets of fruits and sweets on their heads - symbols of the bounty their way of life and their hard work provide. And around their necks are layers of gold jewelry, symbols of wealth that escape the bank vault only on these rare occasions.

The vela culminates in an all-night potluck fiesta. To gather

the crowd, a band strikes up at the house of the mayordomo, and then proceeds to the houses of each of the other members of the gushana, where friends and relatives have gathered to await their turn. Everyone contributes something special - shrimp tamales, say - and a few cases of beer. After a night of dancing and merrymaking, the band strikes up again for the last time, and escorts everyone back to the home where they began.

The origins of the unique traditions of Tehuantepec are lost in the past. Like the rest of Mexico, they're a mix of conquest and indigenous cultures. But it's evident that the matriarchal aspects of Tehuantepec tradition may be closely tied to an ethnic group called the Huaves, concentrated in several small towns in the area, unrelated ethnically to the Zapotec's, having arrived, some think, from either Peru or Nicaragua shortly before the conquest.

To witness the velas of Tehuantepec one must go off the beaten tourist path a bit. But in turn, it's not that far to the Isthmus, and well worth the adventure.

