

Long live the dead of Mexico

By Alexander Hanrath

DAY OF THE DEAD, OR DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS, IS A HOLIDAY AT THE END OF OCTOBER AND BEGINNING OF NOVEMBER. DURING THE CELEBRATIONS, MEXICANS WELCOME THEIR DECEASED RELATIVES BACK INTO THE FAMILY CIRCLE

At the end of October and beginning of November, Mexicans welcome back their deceased into the family circle. Far from being a somber, mournful occasion, Día de los Muertos is the one occasion each year when the dead are beckoned directly with earthly pleasures – be that mezcal or mole. For the family inviting their departed relatives, the ceremony is both a pleasure and a duty.

GRAVE OCCASION

Vivid orange and yellow cempasuchiles (marigolds) decorate tombstones and

crosses, illuminated at night by the glow of thousands of small candles. The whole affair is made mystical by the blue smoke and scent of the burning copal incense. Both the cempasuchiles and the copal carry important symbolism and serve to lead the dead to and from the realm of the living.

Entire families in their Sunday best crowd around their tombs with offers of food, alcohol, snacks, photos and books. It is a full-blown reunion, and many eat their evening meals – picnic-style – on the tombs, sharing with the dead.

Music and dancing figure highly in the

Continued on page 3



PAGE
5 Carbón de Palo



PAGE
7 Restoration of the Tlacolula organ

MINI TAJ
Indian food

Open everyday from 1 to 10pm
Phone, 5158316 Cell, 9511037502 & 9511096960
<https://www.facebook.com/comidahinduoaxaca>
Address: Privada de Azuleas num 115 Col. Reforma
<http://goo.gl/maps/HRHRr>

Writer by Gloria Lorenzen

An Organic Weaver at Work with Teotitlan's Earthy Palette

The rhythmic clack... clack...clack heard throughout in the Zapotec town of Teotitlan del Valle, 28 km from the city of Oaxaca, is like the sound of history's clock still ticking after 500 years. Harness hitting weft on the wooden fixed-frame pedal loom signifies a weaver at work. Most of the people in Teotitlan are involved in the weaving industry. Prior to the pedal loom introduced by the Spanish in the mid-1500s, the Zapotecs wove for more than 2000 years using back strap looms. Therefore, if your plan is to buy a weaving in Teotitlan you'll certainly not be the first to agonize over the decision of which to choose. The more information you have the easier it'll be. Getting to know to one weaver is a good start.

Jose Buenaventura Gonzalez Gutierrez, 54, Zapotec Master Weaver, has the classic Zapotec features: chocolate-colored eyes and thick hair the color of obsidian (Jose's is peppered with grey). He's short by North American standards but well proportioned. And he likes to joke, in Zapotec, Spanish and English. Jose opened Duu Ri-u (Zapotec for Weft Yarn) in Teotitlan with his wife Manuela, in 1987. They live and weave in the same adobe house on the corner of Avenida Hidalgo and Avenida Buenito Juarez as did Jose's father, grandfather and great-grandfather. It's been the family home for 250 years. Weaving blankets (cobija in Zapotec), as they were initially used, supplemented their alfalfa and corn farming income. They made one or two blankets at a time, which they sold to a traveling trader who took them with mule and cart to Oaxaca and Puebla.

"This part was the main house," Jose says pointing to a windowless area 7.5 m x 3.5 m, its walls covered with hanging rugs. Two cluttered desks, a mountain-sized plastic bag overflowing with skeins of undyed wool and a pedal loom that's been in the family since 1928 take up the most of the floor space. Edmundo, his son, is weaving an intricate design on the 85-year-old loom. "This is where I was born, in that corner. We all



Jose with completed order

lived in here, two parents and four kids." The now-enclosed courtyard is the main weaving and dyeing room where you'll find two looms and a brick stove with wide holes for the blue enamel dye pots. Only during the past two of decades was a building erected on the land beside the house. Land where nopal cactus grew and cochinita insects thrived.

Jose has been at the loom since he was eleven. Weaving was not in his long-term plan but after a few years working and studying in Mexico City he returned to Teotitlan. The demand for rugs was growing and he reasoned, "I could be with my family and do what I wanted, be creative." By remaining in Teotitlan he has contributed immensely to the preservation of Zapotec traditions and language.

In a single-weaving family shop like Duu Ri-u you may not see the vast selection available in the large extended family and contracted-out shops, but you'll likely see unfinished rugs on looms, pots of dye baths and skeins of multicolored wool drying on lines or spread out on the stones like a vibrant rock garden.

Originally, the route to Oaxaca ran beside Jose's house along Avenida Hidalgo. In

1929, the first substantial bridge, Puente Benito Juarez was built over the Gueu lia (Little River). In the late 1940s the Pan American Hwy crossed the valley to within 10 km of Teotitlan and since the 1960s there's been a regular bus service to and from Oaxaca. After five hundred years of near isolation, in a matter of a few decades, Teotitlan's weavings became available to the world. Soon after, the supplementary weaving income grew to a main income for many families.

However, the traditional process of organic dyeing – gathering plants, harvesting the cochinita insect (for the glorious reds it has produced for centuries), preparing dye baths – took too much time and time was money. A steadfast method that had not polluted the town's two rivers nor produced harmful fumes found itself in forced retirement. Synthetic dyes sped up the dyeing



Flying shuttle with indigo dyed wool

process and produced more fashionable showy colors. Unfortunately, the toxicity of the rugs grew with their popularity.

But that's changing. Jose and a group of Teotitlan weavers are committed to reviving the organic dyeing methods of their ancestors by utilizing local fruits, plants and trees. In the 1990s Jose resolved not to continue polluting the rivers and land. "I made the decision which way I was going." Leftover dye materials simply go straight into his compost.

The choice has not been without struggles. "It's difficult because organic rugs may cost slightly more because of the work and time that goes into preparing the dyes," says Jose. "Synthetic colors are cheaper, faster to produce so [the weavers] can get on with the weaving much quicker." With organic dyes you must be patient. "I try to educate people so that they understand about the price." If a visitor has the interest and time Jose is always willing to talk.

Like his ancestors, Jose works his farmland every morning before breakfast then begins his weaving and dyeing work; all part of

ICC
Trips

Cultural!

Discover the secrets behind black pottery, cotton and wool textiles. Visit indigenous markets, a 16th century ex-convent and archaeological zones

501 23 59

the labor required to maintain his self-sufficiency as an artisan. It might include carding and spinning wool, checking pots of indigo fermenting in the sun upstairs on the roof, climbing the mountains to pick seasonal plants, walking to a piece of land he owns nearby where he grows specific plants for dyeing and of course, hours at the loom.

"I know my messes," says Jose laughing, referring to his workshop's "organized chaos". The messes are baskets of unwashed wool waiting to be cleaned in the river, washed and dried wool waiting to be carded and spun, divided piles of dyed and natural skeins of wool (some mordanted or prepared for dyeing, and some waiting for another soak in a dye bath). On a long wooden table there's a neat bundle of organic pre-spun wool purchased from local women. Turn around and there's a small bucket of broken pomegranates and a bunch of tall wild marigold in a pot. When I ask what color the orange peel resting on the side of his loom will produce he smiles, "That was last night's snack."

We're in the foothills of the Sierra Juárez mountains. It's this landscape that's replicated in the colors of the organic rugs. Each season adds its character to the dye pot. Some months it's monotone: shrubs, cacti, dirt, rocks, dry riverbeds in browns and dull greens. But other months there are splashes of pinks, oranges, fuchsias and



yellow of the cactus flowers, of yellow-orange of the tiny wild marigolds and dollops of red fruit in the pomegranate trees all set against the mythical blue and shades of indigo mountain backdrop. Even songbirds fill the air with color. The 6:00 am call of braying burros, turkeys gobbling, a trumpeter rehearsing and the smell of small fires under the comal that's heating up tortillas also add to the chroma of the landscape.

Teotitlan's earthy palette is variado or diverse: nogal (walnut) produces several yellow-browns; granada (pomegranate), a yellow-green; cochinita (cochineal), a multitude of red hues and shades; empazuchitl flowers (marigold), a deep yellow; marushi, an intense gold; zapote negro (related to persimmon), a strong coffee color; the pirul tree, a soft yellow; achiote, a dark orange; pericon, green. And depending on the number of dye baths and the original color of the wool, several diffe-

rent hues can be created. Jose obtained a deep purple as the result of first using a marigold dye bath then indigo.

"What I find, I use," he says. Always experimenting, adding to his vast knowledge of organic dyes, he relies on instinct, a sense of timing and plenty of curiosity. He tests and retests, making sure the color is fast before weaving.

Natural dyes can last for centuries, maturing into a luster that's can be luminous. They age like good wine, developing depth, becoming more complex and expressive over the years. But like ancient alchemists that never tired of trying to make gold out of base metals, science and industry continue striving to emulate nature. "Fair trade, organic, 100% natural," are today's success words in business and often used indiscriminately. Beware of bright turquoise, aqua, some lilacs, and hot pinks because they are impossible to make with orga-

nic dyes. Some weavers will advertise "natural, vegetable" dyes showing you a basket of dried pomegranate shells or pieces of tree bark to prove their claim. However they may not add that synthetic dyes are also incorporated into their weavings. They might refer to "cochinilla red" or "indigo blue" not because true cochinita insects or indigo plants were used but in the same way we might say, "fire engine red" or "lime green." Other weavers will admit that they use synthetic dyes in their weavings, but only un poquito. Even a small amount is damaging to the environment.

It will be up to you to ask knowledgeable questions. Talk with the weavers and if possible, visit their workshops. Ultimately, if your rug reflects the landscape of Teotitlan del Valle and the skills of its artisans you have chosen a worthy piece.

As you head towards the highway, you'll pass rows of houses and shops that years ago replaced the fields of wild nopal cactus. Thankfully, the organic weavers of Teotitlan are dedicated to saving their traditions, for all of us.

José Buenaventura González Gutierrez

Avenida Juarez No.53, Teotitlan del Valle, Oaxaca

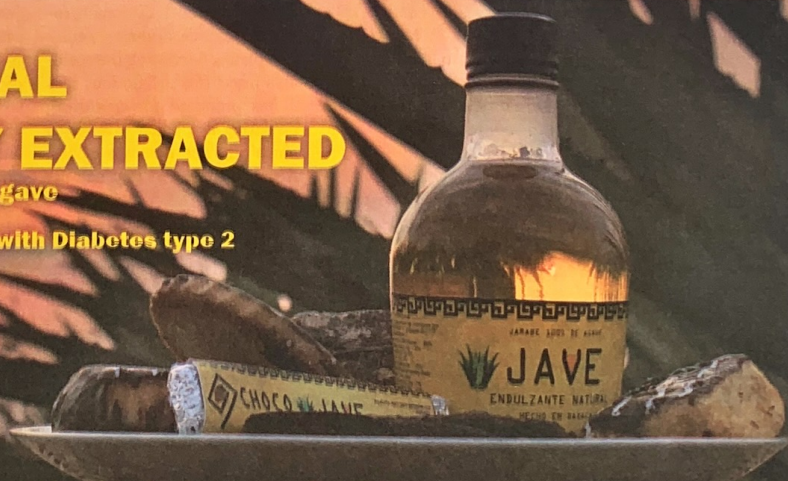
<http://mexicanweaver.com>

An accomplished textile artist, Jose has taught organic dyeing in the USA, San Miguel de Allende and continues to give workshops in his workshop in Teotitlan del Valle.

NATURAL HONEY EXTRACTED

from Mexican agave

Ideal for people with Diabetes type 2



You can buy it at, 200 Murguía St. The organic market El Pochote (Inside of the patio of Xochimilco church) and 602 Belisario Dominguez St. Colonia Reforma