

LA GUELAGUETZA

A Zapotec Tradition of Sharing

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In the mosaic of Mexican customs, its undisputable specificity makes one festivity with very old and deep roots stand out: the Guelaguetza. What does this Zapotec word mean? Many etymologies have been proposed, most of them inventions, and from the confusion about its true meaning naturally springs a misinterpretation of the tradition. Guelaguetza is nothing more than an erroneous transcription of the word *guendalizá*, meaning kinship, friendship and proximity. The last syllable, *zá*, found in all of the above words in Zapotec is an integral part of their culture. It is also found in all words referring to their essence, including the name of their language and race. The ancient indigenous social organization makes all men of the Zapotec race potential relatives. *Guendalizá*, or Guelaguetza, as it is erroneously transcribed by historians and chroniclers and has survived until today, symbolizes the fact of belonging to the same community, referring to the condition of being a relative, neighbor, friend, guest, in a word, brethren or close. Guelaguetza means,

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Photos by Carlos Heinze

Dance. The people of Oaxaca joyously celebrate the Guelaguetza.



Offerings. Today, the people of Oaxaca bring gifts to their state governor during the Guelaguetza.



Dressed up. Women wear their best.

then, that spirit of service among men in the certainty that all joys and all unhappiness belong to everyone at one time or another. José Antonio Gay says the Guelaguetza is the aid the indigenous people offer each other freely at all the most important moments of life: birth, death, the raising of a house and marriage.

This spirit of cooperation and help to relatives, neighbors, fellow countrymen and friends is something attained in day-to-day life, never something sporadic or rare. It dates from the remotest antiquity and, notwithstanding its effects, it cannot really be said that it includes the idea of reciprocity. The aid

Zapotecs give each other is of two kinds: one is in the nature of alms, and the other is a kind of loan or contribution. For example, the help given to a mourner in digging a grave is free, as is the work needed to put up an arbor or lay the foundations or build the walls and roof of a house. In contrast, a contribution is given to help pay for a festivity, be it lay or religious. This contribution may be in coin or in kind. The receiver keeps a list of the contributions he receives in order to make an equal one when his donors require it. All evidence seems to indicate that this is a modern version of the old *Guendalizá* or Guelaguetza. Some-

A Brief History of “Los Lunes del Cerro”

The “Lunes del Cerro” (Mondays on the Hill) festivity, known as the *Guelaguetza*, is one of the most representative holidays combining cultural traditions from the pre-Hispanic period, colonial celebrations and the contemporary world.

Its origins date back to the fifteenth century when the Aztecs set up a garrison at the top of a hill called by the Zapotecs **Daninayaloani** (now known as the Fortín) and celebrated rites in honor of **Centeótl**, the goddess of corn. The ritual dances and feasts culminated with the sacrifice of a maiden representing the deity. The Zapotec and Mixtec peoples living in the area also worshiped their deities, **Cosijo**, god of rain, and **Pitao Cocobi**, god of agriculture and grain fields. The Zapotecs also traditionally made offerings accompanied by song and dance to bring rain and a good harvest.

The arrival of the Spaniards and the intense process of evangelization that accompanied the military conquest transformed the celebration into a Catholic holiday celebrating Our Lady of Carmen. To coincide with the dates on which the indigenous peoples had visited the hill, it was decided that the virgin's day would be Sunday, July 16, of each year. When the sixteenth did not fall on a Sunday, the celebration would take place on the first and second Monday after the sixteenth. This is the origin of the name “Lunes del Cerro.” In place of the highly scented, yellow **cempazúchitl** flower, made as an offering to the sacrificial maiden, the Spaniards used white flowers and added new forms of liturgical celebrations such as the **Dance of the Giants** and the **Parade of the Marmotas** (large balloon figures, held up by a pole in the center and covered by a white cloth on which scenes of the Old and New Testament were painted).

The celebration lost much of its splendor in the early nineteenth century due to the turbulence during and after the War for Independence. However, the custom of celebrating the day of Our Lady of Carmen survived and families visited the hill the first and second Monday of July to spend the morning and early afternoon and partake of a meal. In the twentieth century, the tradition continued, but for the first time included the “**Dance of the Feathers**,” which depicts the Conquest and comes from several Zapotec and Mixtec towns in the Central Valleys of Oaxaca.


In 1932, regional dances were added, along with the presentation of *guelaguetza* to the celebrants. This is a show of brotherhood originating in the tradition whereby Zapotec families return the help received from other families during planting and harvest and for special events, like weddings, births and funerals. In this way, the festivities adopted the name *Guelaguetza* because the members of the 16 indigenous groups native to the seven regions of Oaxaca traditionally brought crafts, fruit and drink to give to those present and performed their music and dances. Since 1968, each delegation names a postulant to the title of “**Centeótl Goddess**,” the maiden chosen presides over the activities on Fortín Hill, the original site of the pre-Hispanic rituals. ❧

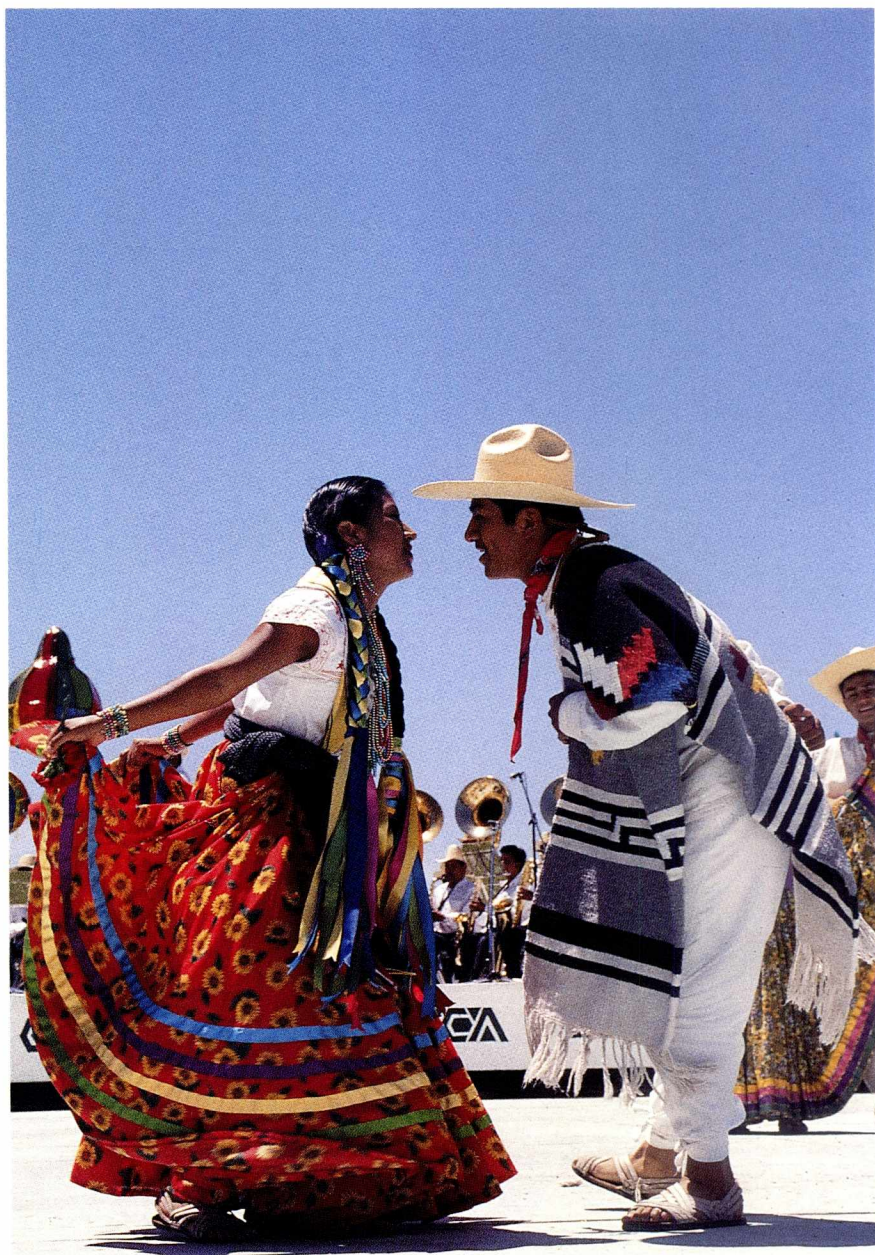


Folklore. Oaxaca's regional dress is as varied as the ethnic groups native to the state.

thing in the spiritual basis of these peoples does not allow them to withhold their help to a relative who might require it. It is not by chance that this kind of event is called “work” in the Zapotec lagoon area. Something enduring in the collective soul of the Zapotecs will not allow them to go empty-handed to a festivity. Even when the host is wealthy, the guests bring a present, poor though it might be, and it is significant that they call it “a sign of affection,” meaning it shows friendship, kinship, affection; in short, it unites all the men of the community.

In recent times and because of the ease with which different regions of the country can now communicate with each other, the Guelaguetza, or *Guendalizá*, has acquired new forms, used to show officials the support of townspeople, to show distinguished visitors the joy their visit creates among their neighbors. Whenever this happens, the indigenous people can be seen coming down from the mountains burdened with offerings, which are not always in money or of immediate practical use. A bouquet of flowers often symbolizes the old custom of coming to the aid of one in need.

This tradition of the peoples of Oaxaca, particularly the Zapotecs is undoubtedly a beautiful custom. I have suggested elsewhere that we use the word Guelaguetza instead of the ugly word *chubasco*, or the even uglier “shower” that have become commonplace in Mexico, imported into the beautiful Spanish language by Philistines. 



Boy meets girl. It's also a good chance to fall in love.

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in the collective soul of the Zapotecs
will not allow them to go empty-handed
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