

# Oaxaca's Community Museums A Door to the Future

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**Community museums tell stories that reveal the knowledge, beliefs and experiences of the indigenous peoples of the state of Oaxaca, whose strength still lies in the great value they place on community organization.**

“**T**he community museum is the cornerstone around which we are going to try to build another future for ourselves; besides reconstructing our past, we are also going to build our future...It is a door so that we indigenous peoples can give something to the world we are part of, as well as receive,”<sup>1</sup> says Jacinto Simón Leocadio, a member of the council of communal lands of San Miguel del Progreso, a town in the Mixtec Highlands of Oaxaca. Their museum, Note Ujia, or “Seven Rivers,” opened its doors in 1996, after five years of community research, land raising and construction of the building itself. Town residents decided to recover and present historical documents and photographs of their long struggle to defend their land. They also decided to include the description of their pre-Hispanic sites and an explanation of their traditional craft, weaving with back strap looms. Today they offer workshops on topics of use and interest to the community, like developing writings in their own language, Mixtec, and improving the quality of their lands by using organic fertilizers.

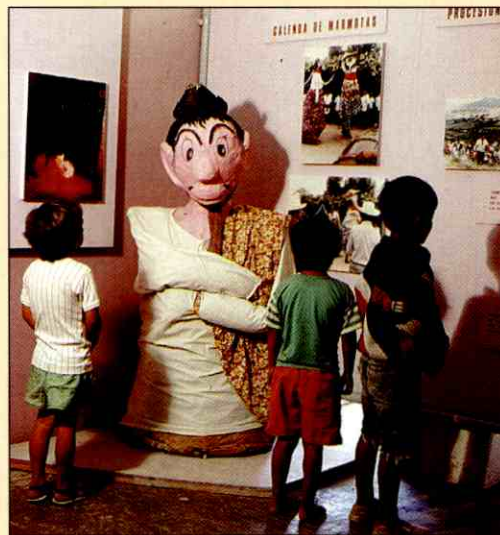
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Oaxaca boasts a total of 12 community museums open to the public, created on the initiative of the communities themselves, and motivated by the discovery of important pre-Hispanic remains, the existence and recovery of documents and buildings from the colonial period, or a growing awareness of the need to document and strengthen traditional cultural practices. While support for craft production and attracting visitors were other important goals, perhaps the most important factor in all the cases is the need to make their voices heard.

The particularities can be seen in the selection of topics. The Shandany ("At the Foot of the Hill") Museum in Santa Ana del Valle, Tlacolula, chose to display local archeological finds, the traditional Zapotec weavings made of wool and the history of the Feather Dance, as well as to document their local experiences during the Mexican Revolution. At the beginning of this century, when the town was attacked by General Carranza's forces in an attempt to penetrate the Juárez Mountains and defeat the mountain rebels, Santa Ana residents watched their crops being burned and their houses destroyed. In their struggle to survive, they retreated to the hills and dug trenches; the women helped grind powder and make bullets for the men who supported the mountain guerrilla fighters. It was a year of hunger, but also of victory because Carranza's troops never overcame their resistance.

The Balaa Xtee Guech Gulal (Shadow of the Old Town) Museum in Teotitlán del Valle displays the town's archeological finds, its woolen crafts and a theme

characteristic of the community, a traditional wedding. This municipality is well known for the size and magnificence of its weddings. Old customs and values expressed in the wedding celebration are emphasized, although the exhibit also includes recent photographs of dances where up to 300 people participate and trucks filled with presents for the bride and groom, including stoves, wardrobes and refrigerators. One scene calls to mind



"Cerro de la campana" Community Museum.

the work that the prospective son-in-law has to do for an entire year before the wedding, like sweeping the patio and carrying firewood, to win the approval of his prospective in-laws. Other displays show the generous presents of fruit and ceremonial candles that the groom's family must take to the bride's, the traditional dress of both bride and groom and the family altar where they still receive the blessing of their godparents and relatives, practices that continue to this day.

The Jna' niingui ("Hill of the Great Conch") Museum of San Miguel Tequixtepec, Coixtlahuaca, opened in 1997, with

an exhibit of palm-leaf crafts. The town meeting picked this topic, says Juan Cruz Reyes, president of the museum committee, "because it is something we do every day, something inseparable from our lives, and yet we see it with different eyes when the total process and history is gathered all together."<sup>2</sup> The committee and artisans who participated were trained in oral history techniques and the exhibit was opened during the town's main fiesta. Juan Cruz, remembering that even people who had emigrated came back to visit it, said, "Many were interested because it made them remember how much they had suffered as children because they had to weave palm leaves to help out at home."<sup>3</sup> Others took the opportunity to see how our people had lived years ago. I think our people established a link to their past...and were able to value their own experiences more."<sup>4</sup>

For the Hitalulu ("Pretty Flower") Museum of San Martín Huamelulpan, Tlaxiaco, the town meeting decided to present its rich archeological collection and focus on traditional medicine. Members of the community did the research themselves and picked four main topics: birthing, *empacho* (severe indigestion), *el mal de aire* (evil wind) and *espanto* (fright). Long interviews with both men and women traditional healers documented how people take fright (or suffer from *espanto*) for example, when someone is upset by an unusual event, like a twister or a coming upon a snake, or because they go by a place where violent acts have been committed. It can also happen because the person sleeps in the countryside, when "we make contact with

the land and body of the place or *bandolera*,"<sup>5</sup> explains traditional healer Carlos Cruz Pablo. Piedad García says, "The land becomes angered when you suddenly touch it; it becomes angered because it already has an owner, the *bandolera*, the owner of the land."<sup>6</sup> The museum's exhibit explains that to appease the offended land an offering should be made of *aguardiente* spirits, cacao, cookies and cigarettes, buried at the four points of a cross drawn in the place where the *espan-to* occurred. Special prayers should also be said asking that the land free the spirit of the afflicted person. Sometimes a cigarette is lit and "the land smokes it."

These museums' profound roots are closely linked to the strength of indigenous community organization. The town meeting or assembly, the highest authority in each community, approves and appoints the members of the museum committee. Those named to these posts accept them as part of the community service they must perform throughout their adult lives. The responsibility of caring for and fostering the community's cultural patrimony is taken on with great seriousness and commitment.<sup>7</sup>

Since 1985, anthropologists, archeologists, historians and museographers from the Oaxaca regional offices of the National Institute of Anthropology and History have supported and advised the communities in developing their museums.

In 1991, the museum committees joined together in a statewide association the Union of Community Museums of Oaxaca, where they can exchange experiences and learn together. The association currently has three main projects.

The first is a training center that organizes community workshops, intensive workshops for individual committees and joint workshops for committees and municipal authorities. The second is the Regional Child's Museum, located in Santa Ana del Valle, Tlacolula, the first museum aimed particularly at Oaxaca's children, with the objective of fostering their overall development and strengthening identification with their mother culture.



Members of the San Pablo Huixtepec museum's committee preparing an exhibit.

The association's third project is organizing a cooperative to offer community tourism services. Since 1995, it has been selling cultural tours to groups of children and teenagers, university personnel and senior citizens. The aim is to develop tourism that respects community culture and preserves their historical and natural heritage in the framework of mutual exchange and learning. After one such visit, a Yale University alumnus said, "The chance to see and experience the efforts of a small indigenous community to affirm its individuality and uniqueness is what I liked the best. The warm friendliness of

the people, especially the school children, was a new window for us into the real Mexico."<sup>8</sup>

These museums are tools for meeting the challenges of change and encouraging community development. Internally, they help create a collective awareness of the community's past and evaluate the possibilities for its future. Externally, they are a space for exchanging with other people and peoples, where outsiders can admire the diversity and wealth of these cultures. ■■■

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Jacinto Simón Leocadio, quoted in Darina Robles "Catálogo de los museos comunitarios 'Cerro de la Campana' de Santiago Suchilquitongo y 'Note Ujia' de San Miguel del Progreso, Oaxaca," (Bachelors thesis) (Universidad Iberoamericana, January 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Collective interview by the authors December 10, 1996, with Juan Cruz Reyes, president of the San Miguel Tequixtepec Museum Committee; Alberto López Córdoba, mayor of San Miguel Tequixtepec; and Israel Soriano, museum volunteer.

<sup>3</sup> During the 1940s many children could not go to school because they had to stay home and help with the weaving. Children were faster and better in the craft, so even when parents were penalized for not sending them to elementary school, they still refused to do it, preferring to pay. [Editor's Note.]

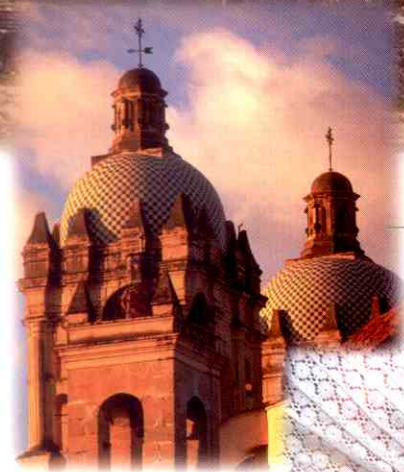
<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Comité Municipal del Museo Comunitario and H. Ayuntamiento Constitucional de San Martín Huamelulpan, *Guía del Museo Comunitario Hitalulu* (Oaxaca, Oaxaca: Centro INAH-Oaxaca, 1991), p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Teresa Morales, "Cultural Appropriation in Community Museums," *Bulletin of the Center for Museum Studies* (Smithsonian Institution, October 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Evaluation sheet filled out by the Yale Alumni Association visitors to Santiago Suchilquitongo, Oaxaca, January 7, 1997.



Monte Alban and  
Oaxaca City  
Declared Cultural  
Heritage for Humanity  
by the UNESCO

Huatulco Bays  
We have everything  
except winter



Isthmus of Tehuantepec  
The most well kept treasure  
of Mexico



Puerto Escondido  
Surfer's Paradise



Gobierno Constitucional del Estado de Oaxaca  
Secretaría de Desarrollo Turístico