



Three Moments In the History of The Huasteca Region

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The Huasteca is one of the cultural regions that has the greatest feeling of belonging in our country. Its deeply rooted regional

identity has been built over several centuries despite its great geographical, ethnic and cultural diversity. Situated in eastern Mexico, the Huasteca region covers part of what are today the states of Hidalgo, Puebla, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, Tamaulipas and Veracruz. This article will touch on three transcendental moments in its history as a region: the Mexica invasion, the introduc-

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Photos courtesy of the author.



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tion of cattle raising and the economic polarization that has resulted from globalization-spurred migration and uprooting parts of the population.

CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT HISTORY AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Groups of Nahuas, Otomís, Tepehuas, Totonacs, Xi'ois and Tének or Huastecs live in the Huasteca. Each has its own cultural parameters and references, but the Tének and Nahuas historically have the greatest presence.

The Tének are an offshoot of the Mayan culture that split off about 3,500 years ago. They achieved advanced architectural development and solid political organization through fiefdoms centered around Tantocob or Oxitipa (today Ciudad Valles, San Luis Potosí) and Pánuco.¹ Fishing, agriculture and crafts were the main activities, showing their mastery of the great diversity of the re-

gion's resources. The most important trade activities included the exchange of cotton and agricultural products and objects made of palm leaves, *zapupe* and cane.²

A first moment in the history of the Huastec region that left an indelible mark was the invasion of the Mexicas around 1450. This brought the Triple Alliance an important increase in tribute since it extended its domain to a large part of what we now know as Mexico. With time, the Tének and Nahua cultures, originally antagonistic to each other, ended up by beginning a process of merger that continues until today.

To understand the way of life and the development of these peoples, it is essential to understand their relationship to the cultivation and cult of corn. The myths about the origin of corn are a fundamental part of the Tének' and Nahuas' world view. Most of them agree that a girl became pregnant by swallowing bird excrement beside a well or spring, and then gave birth to Dhipák (Tének) or Chiko-



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mexóchitl (Nahua). According to some stories, when he was a little boy, his grandmother tried unsuccessfully to kill him. Other stories say that she was successful. But he is always reborn or becomes corn. That is, Dhipák is not only the origin of the plant itself that will provide sustenance for the people, but he also represents the people's tenacious rootedness in the land and the origin of its cultural development. Before corn, they were "savage" groups who fed on *ojoxijtli* tree leaves (*Brosimum alicastrum*), a food typical of their previous semi-nomadic, tribal existence.³

The peoples of the Huasteca use corn in extremely varied ways both as food and in their daily life. They make drinks and breads like *pemoles* and *chabacanes*; soups made of corn dough and vegetables, of tubers and meat, *chilmoles*, *mondongos* and *chilpacholes*; different dishes made with tortillas or dough like *bocoles*; enchiladas with sauces made with green or red tomatoes, or the two combined, *pipián*, sesame seeds, cream, "pinched"

or covered with raw chili peppers, or filled with beans, cheese, sausage, "holy herb" or different stews; an immense variety of tamales of all flavors and sizes like *zacahuil*, the "tamale with its prey," filled with pinto or soy beans, sweet or savory tamales, *cuiches*, *piques*, *elotamales*, *chojoles*, *bolimes*, *piltamales*, *tamales de cazuela* or "pot tamales," *patlaches* and *cuitones*. And every food is accompanied by a good, hand-made tortilla. In addition, they make various wrappings and utensils with the corn husk and silk, the *bojol* or stalk. In short, there is no part of the corn plant that goes unused.

The second fundamental element for understanding these cultures' world view is topography. In the Huastec region, there is practically no community without a sacred hill, spring, cave or river, whether close by or far away. From ancient times, these places have represented the links between heaven, earth and the underworld.

The last and perhaps best known element today is music and dance. For these groups, music has



existed since Man appeared on the earth and accompanies him from his birth to his death. Music and dance always go together and are intimately linked to the organization and cohesion of society, health, community life, production and death: that is, to the cycles of Man and nature. They distinguish between “inside” music and “outside” music, or ritual and festive music. Music and dance accompany Man in each and every stage of his life, both as an individual and as a social being. They also are part of the cycle of nature: people play and dance for rain, for planting, for good harvests, to thank the earth. In this region, we find an infinity of *sones*, depending on the celebration.⁴ Despite their still being part of the culture, Román Güemes quotes Erasmo Montiel as saying that things have changed: “Before there were more wise men....But the musicians of today don’t know our old music, like the music for Carnival, the dance, the ritual music, the *sones* for the ceremony of the ears of corn and other music. We used to use other musicians; today’s musicians don’t know how the *sones* for a fiesta or a ceremony go.”⁵

The *huapango* predominates in the “outside” music; it is a mixture of indigenous and European music, with its origin in the fiesta of the *fandango* or *huapangueada*, a community festivity which is one of the most characteristic and widespread in the region.



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THE PROCESS OF TRANSFORMATION

Geographically, the Huasteca is divided into two large areas: the coastal plain with its hills of lush vegetation and a warm, humid climate, and the mountains, with semi-warm and temperate climates, large mountain ranges, sweeping forests and even some semi-arid zones.⁶

Humanity’s actions have changed the region’s landscape and its climate cycles, making it very different today from what it was until the early twentieth century. The transformation began during the colonial period with the introduction of new systems of production, followed over the centuries by over-cutting of the forests, over-exploitation of the land, over-hunting of wildlife and, lastly, drilling for oil, which has substantially changed both the environment and the way of life of local inhabitants.

As was already mentioned, the introduction of cattle raising was a fundamental historic event that had an impact on the region from its very beginning. According to Miguel Aguilar Robledo, about 1527, the Spanish conquistador Nuño de Guzmán decided that the best way to colonize, exploit and pacify the region was to introduce cattle. This led to a substantial reduction in the indigenous population that was driven out to the rugged mountain slopes.⁷



The region has been discovering the way to adapt to the new conditions without losing its essence.

The introduction of cattle raising would have an irreversible impact on the environment because it caused rapid deforestation with the resulting disappearance of many species of plants and animals. Oil extraction through the entire twentieth century also had an important ecological impact, especially in coastal areas and others like the “golden strip” in the interior.

THE HUAXTECA TODAY

The third important moment in the Huastec region’s history is a consequence of the economic polarization caused by changes in the market and the resulting migration of local inhabitants. The North American Free Trade Agreement and the very dynamic of economic development have created industrial areas in places like the port of Tampico-Madero-Altamira; thermo-electrical plants are being built in Tamuín and Tamazunchale in the state of San Luis Potosí; large expanses of land are cultivated with high-tech techniques; and there is vigorous trade throughout the region. In this context, the indigenous and peasants of the Huasteca are experiencing a great paradox: they live in extreme poverty surrounded by great wealth. Many goods they produce that used to be traded or

exchanged in regional markets or *tianguis* (different crafts like hats, chairs, pottery and riding gear; coffee, honey, chili peppers, beans, tobacco and, of course, corn) are being displaced by products from other parts of Mexico or from Asia.⁸ Increasingly extreme conditions in the national economy have spurred migration, which is having a severe impact on the region, changing the dynamic of traditional social organization and uprooting the new generations. Some continue to subsist by selling crafts or raising and selling barnyard animals (mainly fowl and pigs) and some of the products mentioned above. But a whole other sector of the population has become part of that enormous army of farm workers employed locally in clearing pasture land or harvesting, or who migrate to other parts of the country or to the United States, usually to do agricultural labor.

However, the region has been discovering the way to adapt to the new conditions without losing its essence. In recent years, programs have been set up to foster the recognition and dissemination of the main aspects of the culture, creating important local dynamics. One case in point is the Huasteca Cultural Development Program, created in 1994 under the auspices of Conaculta and the region’s state governments. This program has produced publications, recordings, videos and radio programs; meetings of musicians, dancers, re-





searchers, cultural field workers, traditional doctors, children and young *huapango* players; and an annual itinerant festival that goes through each state and

is a showcase not only for the work done by the program throughout the year, but, above all, for Huastec culture in its broadest sense as seen from many different angles. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Gustavo Ramírez Castilla, "Magna exposición de la huasteca" (paper read at the "We Are from Here, the Huasteca" exposition, organized by Conaculta in Mexico City in 2002).

² Jesús Ruvalcaba Mercado, *La Huasteca: sociedad, cultura y recursos naturales. Pasado y presente*, Ref. 211100-5-G28649H (Mexico City: CIESAS/Conacyt, n/d).

³ Anuschka van 't Hooft, *Lo que relatan de antes* (Mexico City: Ediciones del Programa de Desarrollo Cultural de la Huasteca, 2003), p. 23.

⁴ Román Güemes Jiménez, *Memorias del politimiquistero* (Mexico City: Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 1992).

⁵ Román Güemes Jiménez and Erasmo Montiel, "Los sones antiguos," *Tierra Adentro* no. 87 (2002), Mexico City.

⁶ Miguel Aguilar Robledo, "Las condiciones ambientales de la Huasteca: cambio y continuidad en una región biogeográfica fronteriza," (paper read at the "We Are from Here, the Huasteca" exposition, organized by Conaculta in Mexico City in 2002).

⁷ Miguel Aguilar Robledo, "La ganadería en la huasteca: orígenes y continuidad de un modelo colonial de uso del suelo" (paper read at the "We Are from Here, the Huasteca" exposition, organized by Conaculta in Mexico City in 2002).

⁸ Ana Bella Pérez Castro, *Los mercados en la huasteca* (Mexico City: IIA-UNAM, 2002).

GLOSSARY OF FOOD TERMS

pemoles and *chabacanes*: cookies made from corn and brown sugar baked in a wood-burning oven

pascal: broth made from sesame seeds with wild turkey meat and boiled eggs

estrujadas: tortillas made of corn dough, pork lard and dry, red chili pepper typical of the region

bocol: a ball of dough made with corn and pork lard eaten plain or with different fillings

zacahuil: a large tamale (about 25 kilos) made of cracked, not ground corn, stuffed with pork and chicken mixed with red chili pepper, wrapped in banana and palm leaves and cooked in a wood-burning oven

tamal con presa (a "tamale with its prey"): any tamale stuffed with meat (chicken, turkey, pork, beef, fish or any game animal, known as a *presa*)

cuiche: a tamale whose dough is mixed with fresh beans

pique: a sweet tamale mixed with brown sugar

elotamal: a tamale made with dough mixed with grains of sweet corn

chojol: a large sweet tamale (three to five kilos) made with corn dough and brown sugar

bolim (in Tének) or *patlache* (in Nahuatl): a tamale stuffed with a whole chicken or hen used in ceremonies

tamal de cazuela (pot tamale): a tamale made in a clay pot and filled with some kind of a stew made from chicken or pork with chili peppers, cooked in a wood-burning oven

piltamal: a tamale made with corn dough mixed with bean seeds and coriander



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