

ICWA LETTERS

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Reflections from Chiapas, Mexico -January 1998-

GUATEMALA CITY, Guatemala

June 3, 1999

By Chenoa Egawa

In preparing for my presentation to ICWA Trustees and Members this June, I have taken time to reflect on my past experiences in Mexico and Guatemala. Many of the events that have given me some of the strongest and most enduring memories are the tactile experiences, the imagery, the color, the feelings, the smells and most definitely, the people. In the beginning of my fellowship, loneliness taunted me, testing me continually. At times I wondered if I had what it took to get through those times and it terrified me to think that maybe I did not. I look back on it all now and I see that I have learned a great deal. There still remains much to overcome, but I can say that I have fully appreciated the journey and its lessons so far.

I remember when I was still in Chiapas, Mexico. It was when I had salmonella, in January 1998. It was awful being alone at that time. Things were difficult there anyway, even when I was not sick. The massacre of indigenous people in Acteal had occurred one month earlier. Every day there was more news about the Tzotzil, Tzeltal and Chol peoples of the highlands who were fleeing their villages with nothing more than the clothes on their backs. They fled into the mountains to hide from the army. In their absence, their homes and their crops were burned, and all their possessions were destroyed or stolen by the soldiers, leaving them nothing to return to. Some stayed in makeshift refugee camps suffering from illnesses brought on by lack of food, shelter and clothing, exposure to the cold and the rain, and feelings of distress, trauma and fear. Others remained hidden in the mountains in even worse conditions. Military roadblocks were set up and armed men stopped cars and buses checking everyone's papers. Many foreigners were being kicked out of the country, sent home so that there would be no witnesses. The only communities I felt safe going to were San Juan Chamula and Zinacantan. Both were within an hour's drive of San Cristobal. Beyond that distance, I did not feel safe traveling on the roads alone and risking the possibility of an encounter with the military.

Nobody had confidence in anybody. I could only get so far getting to know people. Introductions were not so difficult, but to establish any real relationships with people was virtually impossible. Nobody wanted to risk trusting anyone new. It just was not a safe thing to do then.

And so I stayed in San Cristobal most of the time. Everything was within walking distance and normally I loved to walk through the streets with all the small houses, each painted a different color — marine blue, bright or-

ange, aqua green, deep yellow, pale peach, hot pink. The marketplace was amazing, too. I went there almost every day to buy produce and to simply wander through the colorful displays of flowers, to look at the baskets of beans — red, black, white, purple and speckled, and to ask about the properties of medicinal herbs stacked chest high. There were oranges and limes arranged in pyramids, and fruits, such as pineapples and papayas brought in from the tropical lowlands. There were apples, local vegetables and greens from the mountains — *guisquil*, *guicoyote*, *chipilin*; varieties of leafy greens; chiles in all colors, shapes and sizes; onions, garlic and spices; corn in black, yellow, white and red; pumpkin seeds and ground, roasted pumpkin-seed powder; ground coffee; live chickens and turkeys; eggs; and fresh homemade tortillas, *atoles* and tamales. It remains one of my favorite markets to this day and I have seen many.

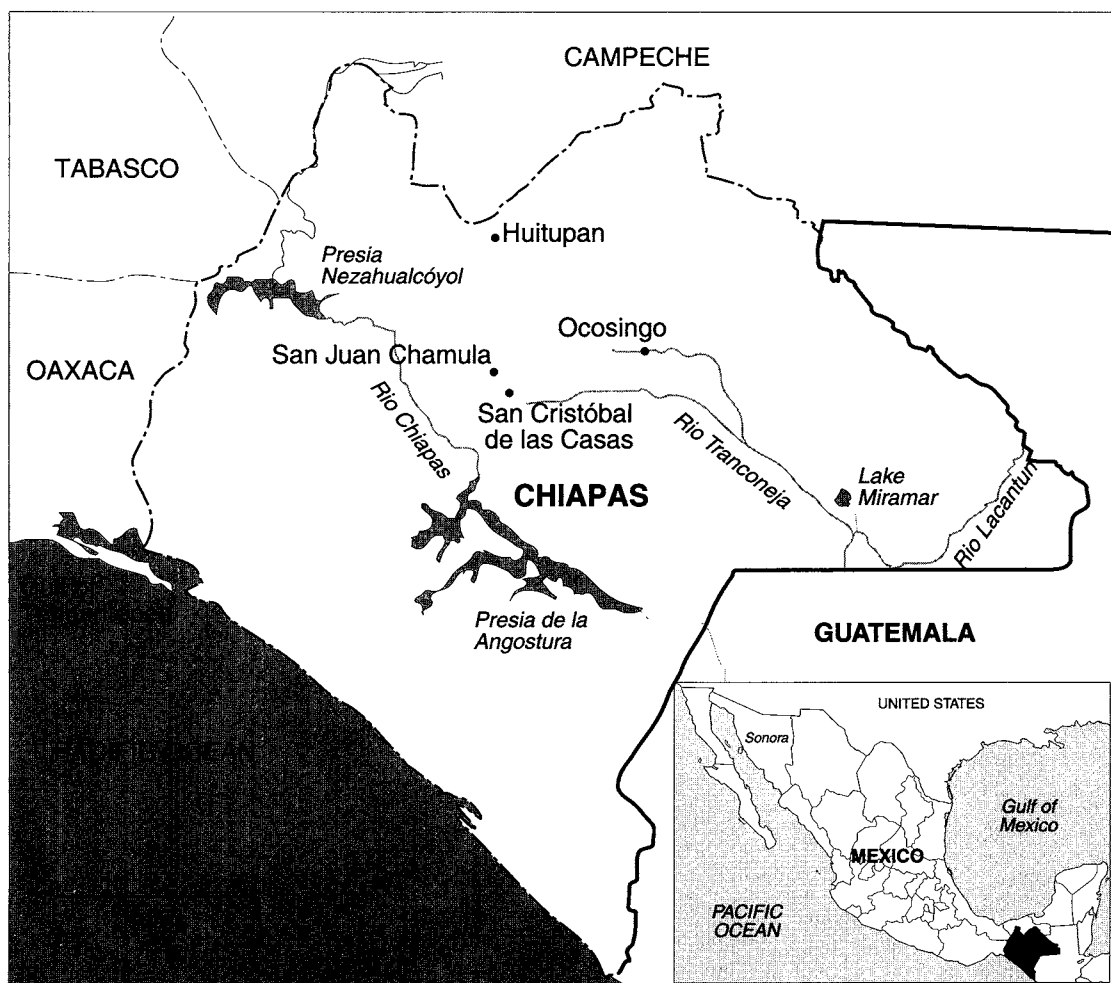
There was the old, historic part of town, with the churches and plazas, and the newer additions of housing and local shops sprawling out from the colonial center. Slums had cropped up in the last several years just beyond the reaches of town, spreading up into the surrounding hillsides. San Cristobal seemed to have a bit of everything, new and old, rich

and poor, modern and traditional.

According to locals, the number of cars and buses had increased dramatically in San Cristobal in recent years, but there were still many streets that had little or no traffic, so walking was pleasant. It was January, though, and the rains had begun. With them the climate had become cold and damp. I had never seen so much rain and it permeated everything. Being sick did not help matters. My bones ached and I had fever. I was exhausted physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

I was struggling, and I think it is okay to admit that now, but at the time I did not want to tell anyone how hard this time was. It seemed to me that admitting my struggles would be synonymous with openly displaying my weakness, my failure to meet new challenges. It is hard to be sick in a foreign country, to be far away from people who care for you, who love and protect you, who share with you. You see, that is the kind of family I come from. We are deeply loyal and we are like best friends. This is rare, and we know how lucky we are to have this.

Such comforts were not a part of my experience abroad, however. I was to learn other things, such as how



to be alone, how to move in this world, how to come to know myself — my abilities, my strengths and my weaknesses. Times of solitude and aloneness can be beautiful, helping one to transcend previous levels of knowing and understanding one's place in this world; loneliness on the other hand, can be bitterly painful. There are lessons to be drawn from each and every experience. I knew early on that I would be taught to find comfort and peace in being alone. This challenge was greater than any I had yet confronted, but it meant everything to me to see it through. I knew that if I succeeded there would be many rewards that would serve me throughout the rest of my life. Perhaps some of the most important things were the development of inner strength, the ability to trust my intuition, to be confident and sure on my life's journey and to appreciate all that I am learning in the process. It was not easy.

I know that we come into this world alone, and we live our lives in the company of family, friends and co-workers if we are lucky, but our experiences are always our own. Even when an experience is shared with others, each individual's perceptions of that time is unique, so to be so far away, to live and experience everything on one's own with no companion to mirror and reflect those experiences and perceptions is to learn to know one's own soul. I could try to tell people what I was going through, but even if I used every last detail to explain, they would never really know what it was like for me to be there in the flesh. Even the people closest to me would never completely understand what I experienced, and in that way I suppose we are all alone.

At the lab the nurse took my blood, rubbing my arm with alcohol first and then drying it off with her bare hand before sticking me with the needle. I never had any confidence in the medical services while I was there, but I had to try and trust someone then. She withdrew the needle from my arm and laid the syringe on the table. My blood dripped out of the needle tip onto the tabletop mingling with other dried drops of blood left from previous patients. I tried not to think about the lack of hygiene. "That was a new needle, right?" I asked a little too late.

"Oh, yes," she said. "Of course."

I took all kinds of tests over the next week, returning to the lab daily to deliver samples of this and that, always going back again for the results. It was not too far from my house to the lab, but the aching in my body made it seem like forever and the chill in the cold, damp air made me feel vulnerable. At the end of the week, with all my lab tests in hand, I walked to the other end of town to the doctor's office. Nightfall had already come and with it more rain. My face was pale, my body weak and my heart sad. I moved through town feeling like a ghost, knowing nobody. I knew I had to take care of myself, but I wished for company. I got the medicines that I needed

to treat the diagnosis — *Salmonella typhii* — and headed back to my house exhausted and worried.

My house in San Cristobal was precious, a small one-bedroom with stone floors and a fireplace, an outdoor patio and a garden. In that garden I often watched and listened to the hummingbirds buzzing in and out of the flowers that grew over the fence separating my yard from my neighbor's. I often sat there and watched the clouds go by too, because in San Cristobal there was something special, something so magical about nature. I would observe the winds, the way they pushed the clouds. I would soak in the brilliance and clarity of the morning and afternoon light. At night, I would contemplate the closeness of the stars, the planets, the moon and the heavens. I cannot really explain it, but there was a magic there that was very much a part of the place and I knew it could heal souls. This magical beauty of nature gave me comfort in those difficult times of loneliness.

I remember one clear, sunny morning particularly well. It was still early and a little bit of the predawn chill remained in the air, but the sun's heat was already strong. I sat in the garden to meditate and pray, and then I sang a song. This song had come to me the month earlier when I was in a spiritual ceremony in Nayarit, Mexico in the Tepehuan village of El Trebol. It came from a deep place within my soul and for the first time I had seen that my spirit is made up of many different levels, levels that are not always accessible to my conscious state of mind. In that ceremony, a door was opened to an old, perhaps ancient part of my being and I knew many things that I had not yet realized, or remembered in this lifetime. The song was one of the things, and when I sang it I remembered the old woman who I had experienced being in that ceremony. This woman knew and loved this earth and she communicated that knowledge and that love in the song through me. Her knowledge of the earth was great. The song was communicated in pure emotion and it expressed a deep respect and fondness for this earth, as if it were a child to be loved and cherished. There were also emotions of sadness, hurt and anger, because the earth was no longer in balance. She was an old woman, a bird, infinitely wise. I sang the song that day in the garden and through it, communicated my emotions with nature. There was not a cloud in the sky that morning, but huge raindrops began to fall over me in the little garden where I sat. It was not raining anywhere else. The huge drops continued for a few moments getting stronger and bigger before they stopped. Then the sun's heat drew the healing moisture back up to the sky. I know that the rain blessed me that day, that it heard my song. Nature is that way. Still, it is hard to describe what a wonderful feeling it is to be acknowledged by nature.

That song continues to teach me. For instance, I have learned the strength of communication beyond spoken language. We can communicate many things through expression and emotion, especially when conveyed

through songs, music and gestures. Whether or not we come from the same culture or speak the same language is unimportant, because when an expression is pure and when it comes from the heart, people will understand. In fact, the language of the heart is capable of expressing much more than spoken language, because it is freer, not confined within the barriers of definitions.

Some friends of mine who lived in Mexico City had been trying to reach me. I had a cellular phone, because the local phone company told me that they would not be able to install a phone line in my house. There was a list, though, and I could put my name on it if I wanted to, but it would remain there with all the others for perhaps years to come. I was not used to taking care of a cell phone and I certainly did not like carrying it around San Cristobal. It just seemed excessive. Besides, I was not expecting many phone calls. My friends in Mexico City finally got through to me after many futile attempts. They said that they had been worried about me, because it had been a month since we had last spoken. I told them that I had been having a hard time and that I was quite ill. One of them, Francisco, told me that he would get on the bus that afternoon and come down to help me out. It was a 17-hour bus ride from the Federal District, but that did not bother him at all. Early the next morning, he arrived at my house in San Cristobal.

The comfort of companionship helped me immensely. Francisco stayed for several days, preparing special teas for me from roots and herbs he had brought from Mexico City. In addition to his remedies, I was taking strong medications that the doctor had prescribed. Little by little I began regaining some of my strength.

One day we decided to go to San Juan Chamula, a nearby Tzotzil Mayan village. In the main plaza of San Juan there is an enormous white church. It was one of my favorite places to spend time and whenever I had visitors, I would take them there. The church was Catholic, but its interior would most likely be unrecognizable as such to the traditional Catholic devotee. There, as in most Mayan villages, Catholicism had a very unique interpretation and represented a combination of Mayan and Catholic beliefs.

We entered the church, lit only by candlelight, and immediately the familiar smells of pine needles and copal filled my nostrils. I breathed in the rich earthy aromas fully, exhaling slowly. Again my mind flashed back to the ceremony in Nayarit. When copal was burned that night, its smoke seemed to travel easily through my mind, opening up pathways and awakening memories to distant, yet familiar places. With each new breath of the sacred incense I could go deeper into those memories and see everything clearer.

Long, green pine needles covered the floor of the church, creating a soft, aromatic carpet. The walls were

lined with glass cases containing life-size models of all the different saints bedecked in layers of colorful satin robes. Before the cases, there were small altars of candles and flowers. Each saint wore a large mirror, either square or circular that hung like a necklace at stomach level. I had asked someone before about these mirrors, because I had never seen this type of adornment worn by the saints. I was told that the mirrors represented the reflection of each saint's spirit. I think the mirrors were a Mayan touch. I had heard of other indigenous cultures in Mexico using obsidian stones in the same way before there were mirrors in this part of the world. These cultures knew well the importance of reflection and meditation in a person's spiritual growth.

All of the pews had been taken out of the church. From the back to the front of the massive structure, several individual ceremonies took place upon the floor. Tzotzil people, dressed in traditional wool clothing, the women in skirts and *huipiles* and the men in pants and jackets, knelt upon the pine needles. One family prayed for their little boy who was ill. An old woman was conducting another ceremony. Two other women sat by her side accompanying her in a prayer. Each small grouping of people sat illuminated in the light of their offerings, rows of candles of assorted colors placed on the floor before them. Other offerings included bottles of Pepsi and liquor, copal, eggs and flowers. In one moment, a deep resonating sound filled the church and I turned to see where it came from. Before one of the individual altars sat a woman. She blew on a small gourd whistle four times before placing it down. I could then hear her praying in her language, Tzotzil. She spoke quietly but there was an urgency in her pleadings, her prayer went on and on without a break. Low mummings of other's prayers could be heard in the otherwise silent church. The whole scene was aglow with literally hundreds of tiny, bright white dancing flames, the kind of light that beckons the eyes, transfixing them, soothing. In the front of the church there were huge bouquets of white and yellow flowers and rows and rows of more tiny candles. It was a holy place that filled all of my senses and put my heart at ease. My friend and I stood to one side of the church near the saints and observed in silence.

Two Tzotzil men were also off to the side. They were cargo holders, selected by the local civil and religious authority to serve one year taking care of the church and the saints. Cargo responsibility is held for one year by men of many Mayan communities, and none of the cargo holders receive payment for their services. The two men talked and joked quietly. Often times they would pass the long days sipping from a bottle. Alcohol had become an acceptable part of ceremonial life. A group of young boys came into the church together. They were laughing and chasing one another around. They noticed Francisco and me and tried to get our attention. One little boy would do something funny and then look over to see if we were

laughing. We both remained quiet, but I never could resist smiling at a child.

A drunk, mute, had also wandered into the church. He was staggering around from person to person. Everyone ignored him, as if he did not exist. He would approach someone and wave his hands around slowly, his limbs almost paralyzed with the effects of the alcohol. At the same time his face twisted and contorted in slow motion as if he were trying to form the words to say something, but over the years his mouth had forgotten how to speak and his voice had been swallowed up along with too much drink. He was a town drunk, just another clown. He just was, and they let him be. The two men looked over at us as if to say, excuse him, he's pathetic, and an embarrassment to us all. As if the drunk heard what the cargo holder's glance told us, he turned his head slowly in our direction, arms extended out to his sides as he teetered on wobbling legs. His head turned slowly and his eyes followed even slower. When his gaze finally reached us, his head had already passed and he moved his tired skull slowly now from side to side in an attempt to stop the motion.

With great effort, he moved toward us, his face tilting from side to side, but his tired eyes held us in focus. Stopping right in front of us, he began to gesture with his hands and his arms, pointing to himself, then to Fran-

cisco and then to me. My immediate reaction was repulsion. I do not think he had bathed in years and his stench was of rot and decay. The little boys and the two men were now watching us intently to see how we would react. The drunk would pat himself on the chest, and wave his hands, fighting to control the nonstop movement of his lips and mouth. Then he extended a filthy hand to each of us and we took his hand and looked him squarely in the eyes. I did not want to encourage him and if I had been alone, I would not have let him get so close, but I did feel for the old soul. He remained by us for quite some time, trying to say something, but the words never came. Finally, my friend Francisco raised his arms straight out to his sides with the palms of his hands open. He looked out toward all the saints in their glass cases, toward all the candles and flowers, and in one long, sweeping and deliberate motion he gathered all of these images into his hands and placed them upon his heart, pausing for a moment. He then took his hands from his own heart and placed them upon the heart of the drunk. In an instant, the old man broke down into tears and sobbed like a little child. He hugged Francisco and wept on his shoulder and then he hugged me. He stepped back from us and looked into our eyes with clarity and disbelief shaking his head from side to side, as tears rolled down his face. His sad gaze thanked us over and over. He took our hands in his once again and then silently walked away. □

Author: Egawa, Chenoa
Title: ICWA Letters -
The Americas
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World
Affairs, Hanover, NH

Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; South Asia;
Mideast/North Africa;
Europe/Russia;
Sub-Saharan Africa

ICWA Letters (**ISSN 1083-4303**) are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

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