

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-26 Walking to the Center of San Pedro: Downtown at Last

Apdo. 27  
Ocotlán, Oaxaca  
México  
23 June, 1975

Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017  
EE. UU.

Dear Mr. Nolte:

Across the arroyo on the path from my house to the center of the village, the first house on the left belongs to the widowed mother of one of the promotores. I came to know her son and her when I gave them a ride home from Juquila, a shrine that is the object of a major annual pilgrimage for people of all classes from Oaxaca and neighboring states. Some San Pedro people still make the journey the old way, overland on foot. It takes eight days one-way. Increasingly they go by truck and bus, which takes three days one-way. At 64, the promotor's mother could not stand the trip on foot. She was able to make the pilgrimage by truck and bus, and thus fulfill a life goal, because her son had the money to pay her fare and other expenses.

Promotores are health and education aides drawn from the indigenous populations and trained by state and federal agencies. Three years ago, when word circulated in the Miahuatlán Mixtepec area that ten young men would be selected to be trained for work in the Mixtepec region, San Pedro men applied in greater numbers than those from any other village. Seven of the ten finally selected are San Pedro natives, a percentage far out of proportion to the demographics of the area.

The mission of the promotores is to advance literacy training and health education by bridging the gap between the outside world and the indigenous population. The promotores have a theoretical advantage over non-indigenous teachers in that they speak Zapotec and know local mores. In fact the promotores meet resistance precisely because they are locals: townspeople resent the promotores' receiving high pay for physically easy work, and resent young men presuming to tell their elders how to live. The promotores are the most intelligent, outgoing of their generation. Hungry for experience in the outside world, and for good pay in clean jobs, they lunged at the opportunity to be trained in Oaxaca. Now they find themselves stranded back in Mixtepec villages, one alone in each of seven, some of which are traditional rivals of their own native villages. Their roles are artificial and their training perforce inadequate. They live for the weekends, when they can get away.

When the promotores throughout Oaxaca struck recently because a promised raise in pay had not been delivered, their placards included slogans

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Woodward A. Wickham is an Institute Fellow concerned with the condition of Indians in North America. He currently lives in San Pedro Mixtepec (Miahuatlán), a Zapotec village in southern Oaxaca, México.

to the effect that the government was exploiting and mistreating the Indians of Oaxaca. The reaction to the strike in San Pedro was unanimously negative. By quitting work and demanding a 50 per cent raise, these young men, who appeared to do so little to earn their already high salaries (about US \$100 monthly), were conclusively demonstrating their arrogance. So said people in San Pedro.

The next compound on the left belongs to the Chontal carpenter-healer. Chontal country lies over the mountains to the southeast, twenty miles-- a two-day walk-- into the hot country.\* The carpenter-healer came from there to San Pedro 30 years ago, married a San Pedro woman, and has since become the highest-paid carpenter and healer in the village.

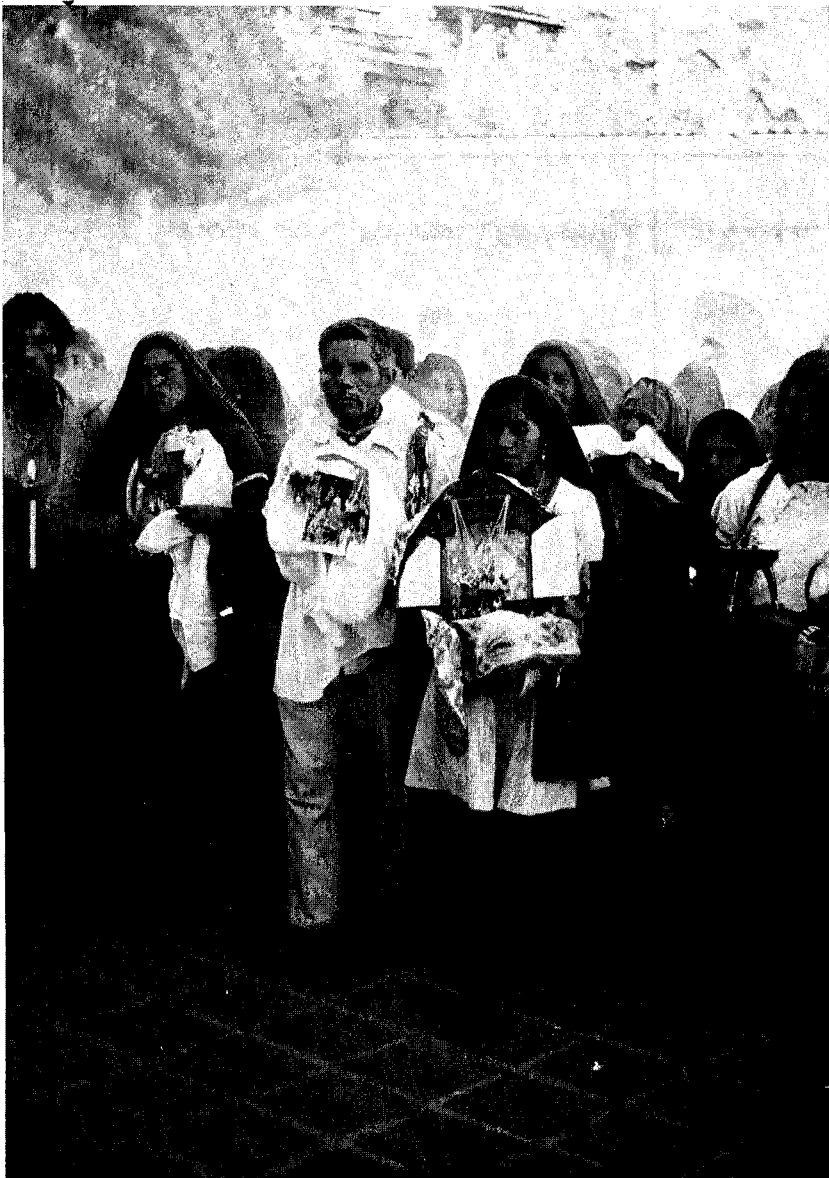
The Chontal's specialty as a healer is the use of plants, but he also employs prayer and smoke. For himself and his family, he does not balk at seeking help from Western medicine. Last fall I told his daughter that she probably had a lung disease (tuberculosis), that I wanted to drive her to the valley for tests. I explained that if the tests proved that she had that disease, the treatment would be long-term, almost certainly successful, and free of charge, thanks to a government anti-tuberculosis program. She said she was willing to go, but that she would have to consult her husband. The husband was skeptical: he doubted the treatment would be free. "What if we accept the medicine and then next year they come and want their money?" He said he and his wife could not go with me. He said they would not "risk it." Finally her father, the Chontal carpenter-healer, said he would accompany his daughter to the valley. His readiness to go impressed the son-in-law, who then agreed to go himself. As it turns out, the son-in-law was justified in his skepticism. The public health clinic in Miahuatlán has been unable to supply half the woman's medicine. If I had not been able to cover the cost of what we have had to buy in commercial pharmacies, the family would have been left with the bill-- which they could not have paid, or would have had to discontinue treatment.

The Chontal healer says he first understood the effectiveness of modern medicine when he was cured of angry blood as a young man. He had been restless, quick-tempered, and violent for more than two years. Working on a coffee plantation, he complained about his angry blood to his boss, the plantation owner. The owner took him to Oaxaca to consult a doctor there. The Chontal stood outside the doctor's office while his boss briefed the doctor. When the Chontal was called in, the doctor explained that he merely needed to have some of his angry blood replaced with coward's blood. The doctor drew a liter of blood from the Chontal's arm, left him lying on the cot for a long time, then came back and introduced into the other arm a liter of coward's blood. The treatment cost the boss 30 pesos. The Chontal has had no trouble with angry blood since that day.

When the mother-in-law had been ill with abdominal pains for several weeks, and had not been relieved except briefly by the San Pedro curanderas she called in to massage, pray, and suck out foreign bodies, she called in the Chontal. He said he would have to cure the entire household, at a price of 50 pesos each. The mother-in-law paid the price for herself and her three unmarried daughters. Maria, Venancio's wife, paid for herself. Venancio refused treatment. The mother-

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\* The Oaxaca Chontals are unrelated to the Chontals of Mayan origin in Chiapas and Tabasco. The Aztecs named both groups chontalli ("strangers"). To avoid confusion, anthropologists refer to the Oaxaca Chontals as the Tequistlatec.



in-law recovered promptly.

Unless one is a healer, being a Chontal in San Pedro is not easy. The Zapotecs of the Miahuatlán Mixtepec region are traditional enemies of the Chontals. In 1527, about 6,000 Zapotecs and 200 Spaniards subdued the Chontals. That event remains in San Pedro oral history as: In the time of the ancestors, the people of San Pedro and San Juan conquered the Chontals. The Chontal territory has since been considerably reduced by Zapotec incursions. Colonial accounts report that a tax collector sent into Chontal country after the 1527 subjugation was quartered and eaten in tamales. There are those in San Pedro who say the Chontals still eat human flesh. In contrast to the wide-ranging, more acculturated Zapotecs, the Chontal are a sedentary, agriculturalist people. Anthropologists report that they have not embraced Catholicism. San Pedro people consider the Chontals backward, ignorant, and violent.

I said in an earlier newsletter that I thought the fact I am a foreigner increases local confidence in me as a healer. Likewise I suspect that being Chontal has helped the carpenter-healer attract clients and justify high fees. He is not just foreign, he is Chontal. He knows the plants of the hot country. These are said to be stronger remedies than local San Pedro plants. Because the Chontals are backward gentiles (heathens), the Chontal carpenter-healer is



thought to have access to the esoteric knowledge of the ancestors. The Chontals are denigrated publicly for their ignorance, but privately it is admitted they know their magic.

The carpenter-healer's son has learned carpentry from his father but not healing. He is neither Chontal nor Zapotec. He speaks only Spanish. His young wife is the only woman I have seen under thirty in San Pedro wearing traditional dress— the long dark skirt and embroidered blouse. About fifteen years ago, one of the schoolteachers announced to the girls of the town that they should no longer wear traditional dress to school. Some parents kept their daughters out of school after that, both because they objected to the dictum and because their daughters had only traditional clothes to wear. But within a few years, all the girls in San Pedro were wearing cotton dresses. The Chontal's son rejects his father's theories of disease and healing as creencias (superstitious beliefs), and doggedly pursues opportunities to work and live in the towns and cities of the Oaxaca valley, yet he allows or, more likely, encourages his wife to be the only remaining young woman in old-fashioned dress. It may make him feel less an outsider.



A few yards further along, the dirt path from my neighborhood meets a stone-paved path from the giant cypress high up the mountainside. Turning left, downhill, one enters the commercial center of the village. Fifteen months ago I first saw San Pedro when I rode into town in the back of a six-ton truck delivering supplies from Miahuatlán to the five tiendas (stores) clustered around this intersection. The full moon of March lit the cobblestones and whitewashed buildings the two-tiered fountain surrounded by enormous geraniums, the red-tile roofs, heavy wooden house-beams, doors, crosses, and benches. Kids ran shouting beside the truck and pressed around me when I jumped down. Why is it that in some villages kids throw stones and shout "Gringo?" That night in San Pedro, they kept asking if I was going to come and live in San Pedro. I decided I would.

If one walks to this intersection as the sky is just becoming light before dawn, as smoke begins to seep out beneath the roofs of the houses, covering the village with a thin white veil, one finds several women and girls selling bread from small baskets. They sell the bread six or eight at a time to other women and girls who come in twos and threes to buy for the family breakfast of coffee and bread. All these women and girls wear black

shawls with silver threads, the rebozo ubiquitous in rural Mexico. It is used to cover the head, hide a smile, carry a baby. In this case, it keeps others from seeing what has been bought.

By the time the sun has risen over the mountain ridge to the east, the bread sellers have left the intersection. Breakfast is finished. Children walk by on their way to school. Now a peddler arrives with a loaded burro. He comes from San Felipe, over the mountains to the south, on the Pacific slopes. He ties his burro behind the open-sided, tile-roofed structure called the mercado (market). He carries his two big bundles into the shelter of the empty market and sets them side by side on the worn brick floor. He unties the hemp cord binding the straw mats into makeshift hampers. They flop open to reveal his merchandise: two stalks of stubby, greenish bananas. He sits down next to his bananas on a low wall dividing the market floor from the street. Schoolboys play tag around him. The intersection suddenly fills with dogs. They fight. The schoolboys stone them. Housewives come to buy bananas. Some only ask the price and move on. They may be storekeepers.

Most days of the year, that is the extent of the action in the San Pedro market: local bread sold at dawn, and a little produce sold through the day by peddlers. If not bananas they bring coffee beans or corn or onions or the fruit of the season. With the cash from their sales they buy processed goods in one of the tiendas and return to their distant villages over the mountains. In a market like this one in the villages where the peddlers come from, Venancio sells the bread his mother-in-law makes. The market in neighboring San Juan Mixtepec looks just like this one, and in San Lorenzo Mixtepec, and in most of the villages of the region. If you know nobody in a village and you are just passing through, you are allowed and obliged to sleep in the market. That is where the banana man will sleep.

Twice a year, the priest visits San Pedro. Twice a year, one can buy sweet ices and have one's picture taken by a travelling photographer who sticks his head in a black plush bag. Twice a year, this market fills to overflowing with vendors of fruit, saddles, beans, poultry, dried fish, crockery, mats, hats, beads, sugar cane, and more, the variety and plenty that make little children gape and stumble. These are the fiesta days, two weekends of celebration, fireworks, drunkenness, and trade to honor the patron Saint Peter in June and mark the Fifth Friday of Lent in March. Two days after the fiesta, the market is all but deserted again.

Until 1955, the market was livelier all year long. One could buy cloth, sugar, salt, chiles, and the like nearly every day. Then in 1955 Venancio's godfather formed a partnership with three other men and opened the town's first tienda. Today there are more than ten tiendas. Counting several that open only on fiesta weekends, they may number fifteen. Probably the heyday of the tiendas has just passed. Early this year, the National Indian Institute opened a CONASUPO store in San Pedro, a federally subsidized staples outlet. Because of its low prices, the CONASUPO has cut deeply into sales at all the private tiendas.

The five tiendas located at or near the intersection where the market stands account for probably 75 per cent of sales from private shops in San Pedro. Most days during the dry season, October to June, when cargo trucks deliver to San Pedro, one can find the following in one or another of these five main tiendas:



Fresh Foods

eggs  
onions  
chiles  
beans  
corn  
coffee  
salt  
cinnamon  
cloves  
garlic  
wheat  
sugar (raw)

Notions, etc.

cloth  
ribbons  
thread  
needles  
pins  
hats  
t-shirts  
pants  
shirts  
sandals  
sashes  
undershorts  
matches  
stationery

Processed Foods

rice  
cornstarch  
macaroni  
gelatin dessert  
sugar (white)  
flour  
yeast  
condensed milk  
hard candy  
cookies  
powdered milk  
broth cubes  
sardines  
pickled chiles  
soda pop  
beer  
mescal

Notions, etc. (cont'd)

notebooks  
ink  
pens and pencils  
costume jewelry  
cigarettes

Medicines, etc.

Entero-Vioform  
(amebicide)  
aspirin  
vitamin tonic  
mentholated unguent  
terramycin lozenges  
terramycin tablets  
sulfa ointment  
sulfa tablets  
Aralen (anti-malaria)  
alcohol  
hydrogen peroxide  
merthiolate  
cotton  
bandaids

Hardware

nails  
hinges  
rope and cord  
pails  
wire  
plastic sheeting  
lantern parts  
white gasoline  
kerosene  
batteries  
flashlights  
candles  
metal cookware  
tortilla griddles  
cutlery  
crockery  
shot glasses  
plastic bags

One of the five big tiendas is owned by five men. Drinkers tend to gather there. One of the owners started a binge six months ago and has not quit yet. He came to my house two weeks ago saying that owls and bulls were chasing him and that I had brought them to San Pedro. Later his mother came to show me where he had bitten her. She asked for medicine to make him stop drinking. I do not shop where the men gather to drink.

The other four tiendas are one-owner businesses. One is owned by the father of the man who held his wife under the armpits in the birth I described in WW-22. He himself opened a tienda, you remember, through his window that looks out on the trail out of town. It did not succeed. He has taken up bee-keeping. I rarely buy at his father's tienda. He is nearly blind, and acts confused. When I ask what I owe, he pulls the prices out of thin air, a different price for soda pop from one day to the next. He makes me uneasy.

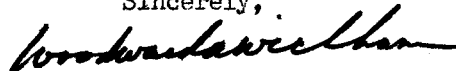
Another is owned by the man who this year began a three-year term as síndico. Only the tienda-owners and other rich men can afford to hold top town offices. They are unpaid posts. Seven days a week, all year, for three years, one is expected to be at the municipal offices or elsewhere on town business. The síndico's wife-- who tends the store these days-- has a molar abscess that flares up every two months. Her two youngest daughters both have terrible teeth. When the Flying Dentists flew into neighboring San Juan last year, they noticed that the kids with the worst teeth were the shop-owners' children. They have easy access to soda pop and candy.

The owner of the fourth-biggest tienda has already served as town president. He is the look-alike cousin of Venancio's godfather, whom he succeeded in the presidency. Between them they probably account for ten per cent of the private wealth in San Pedro. The tienda owner's wife is a Tehuana (a Zapotec from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec). True to Tehuana reputation, she is a shrewd, aggressive merchant.

The fifth big tienda is owned by a man who helped me through 48 hours of hell last year when the Toyota Land Cruiser was aground on the edge of the worst upgrade along the road to Miahuatlán in a long downpour. It looked as if it would shortly tumble over the edge and down the steep bank. Soon after the Toyota adventure, he consulted a Oaxaca doctor about an anal fistula he has had for several years. The doctor burned an area about as big as a quarter on the buttock near the fistula. The fistula remained unchanged, and the burn gave him a lot of pain. I dressed it for him until it healed. Since then we have been good friends. I generally buy at his tienda.

One can walk back to my house from downtown by the same route, or take the main trail out of town and then cut up a steep path to the house, past where the owls and bulls have the drunk at bay, past the neighbor who sat up all night on guard after someone fired a pistol at his house and hit my roof on the ricochet, past the cornfield where I used to go before I was threatened with a formal complaint. But that is the long way home, and the story of that walk is a long story.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham