

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-29 Conflict in San Pedro: An Excuse for Change

Apartado 27
Ocotlán, Oaxaca
México
1 October, 1975

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

Dear Mr. Nolte:

People's beliefs and values change more slowly than their lifestyles. The men of San Pedro have been travelling in mestizo Oaxaca in large numbers for fifty years, but their successful experience in the outside world and their mostly admiring reports to the folks back in San Pedro have still not eradicated their fear of outsiders and their judgement that outmigration is perilous.

Arriving in the back of an eight-ton truck for one of my first visits to San Pedro, I discovered how strong the xenophobia still is there. I was being questioned about my paisanos (countrymen). One Pedruno boy about 13 said nothing, stood silent and watching intently, while the other passengers asked about wages in the U.S., crops, and so forth. An older Pedruno who works as a carpenter's assistant in Oaxaca was returning home for a holiday. He let it be known that he had travelled all over Mexico. As we lurched around the last curve and began the steep descent into the village, the carpenter's assistant winked at me and shouted over the roar of the motor:

"They say that you people eat children. Is that true? Do gringos eat children?" He was grinning and glancing at the boy, who was staring at me.

"No, no, of course we don't eat children," I said firmly.

The carpenter's assistant winked at me energetically. "Well, I don't know," he said, "but people tell me that gringos eat children."

"Look," I told him, "probably the people in Miahuatlán say you people in San Pedro eat children. People say that about people they do not really know." The other passengers laughed, except the boy, who just watched me. My beard was long and black. I stood a head taller than the tallest Pedruno in town. No white man had ever lived there before.

The carpenter's assistant would not quit. "Then it is just lies? You never eat children, you people? What do you say?"

"No, never," I said. Then something got into me. We passed the houses at the edge of the village. I was silent for a long while. Then in a casual tone, my voice barely audible over the scream of the brakes against the steepness of the descent: "Well, if we find one that is very, very tender--"

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The boy broke into helpless sobbing. The men were laughing, and telling him not to cry, that "real men do not cry." But he kept crying. I was horrified at what I had said. I told the boy I was just teasing, that we absolutely never ate anyone, but he only grew more terrified.

The women of San Pedro— tied to the household, most of them monolinguals, with only other women to talk with— are the guardians of traditional beliefs, including the fear of outsiders and the outside world. Venancio's mother-in-law, for instance, ridicules his talk about succeeding as a truckdriver or a radio repairman. She warns her daughter not to think of working as a domestic in Oaxaca. She says the people there live a very different life, that her daughter could never learn to live that way. Daughters in San Pedro are strictly guarded until they marry. Few girls visit Miahuatlán, and fewer Oaxaca. The men of San Pedro— travelers, journeymen, most of them competent speakers of Spanish— often scold their women for their superstitions. Venancio dismisses his mother-in-law with classic contempt for the traditional wisdom. San Pedro boys accompany their fathers as soon as they reach puberty. A man of 20 may already be making sales trips alone to distant cities and towns. By the time they marry, a man and a woman stand on opposite sides of the abyss that separates the modern mestizo Mexican from the isolated Indian. The husband commonly leaves his wife and children for months at a time, but expects her to live within strict rules of chastity and decorum while he is absent. As much as husbands scold their wives for their old-fashioned notions about the world, religion, health, and so forth, and show embarrassment in my presence when their wives speak barely understandable Spanish, the husbands themselves insist on punctilious traditional behavior from their women. Many men enforce the conservative code of behavior with beatings.

The war with San Juan marked the beginning of the observable movement of people out of San Pedro, and a frank exploitation, despite fears, of the outside world as a source of new ideas and opportunities. One of the two richest elders told me:

"Like all bad things, the war brought good things, too. Before the war, the people lived a different way. Few people left the town. The pedlars went to Miahuatlán to buy merchandise and sold it up in the mountains, but they did not travel far. Now even the young men leave, some to Oaxaca, some to Mexico City. When the war came, we could not go to Miahuatlán, we could not bring in supplies that way [because San Juan lies along the trail from San Pedro to Miahuatlán]. So people began to cross the mountains to the Isthmus. Some went away to live for many years. It was dangerous here. Some have come back. I went away. I went all the way to Mexico City. I saw how people there live. People came back and said, 'This is how they do it in Juchitán,' or 'This is how they do it in Oaxaca.' People began to travel. That helped us greatly. The war brought us this benefit."

Before the war, San Pedro had tended toward inertia and isolation. By tradition, the people devoted themselves to serving and preserving the community, safe from threats from the alien outside world. But centrifugal pressure was growing. Available cultivable land, worked with traditional methods, failed

to support a growing population. Estimating from the increase in the number of dwellings in the village, I judge that the population grew from 1900 to 1930 by about one-third, and from 1930 (the end of the war) until the present by about three-quarters. Arable land is poor and scarce in these steep uplands. At the turn of the century, a typical family is said to have produced corn and wheat sufficient for the full year. Today a typical family holds enough land to produce only about a third of what it needs for the year. Centrifugal pressure grew further as more children, mostly boys, learned Spanish in the local school. The war, the factionalism that grew out of it, and the legion private feuds and vendettas supplied San Pedro men with justifiable motives-- self-preservation and solidarity with fellow victims-- for outmigration previously discouraged by traditional, archaic values. Conflict lent Pedrunos a pretext. It let them act on expansive impulses they had not the courage otherwise to recognize and obey.

With the establishment of a few families in Oaxaca during the years after the war, Oaxaca became a powerful magnet to those who left San Pedro in later years. True to the strong customs of hospitality that operate in the mountains, Oaxaca Pedrunos received newly arrived emigrants with generosity, and they still do. There are more than 400 Pedrunos in Oaxaca in an average month now, most of them permanent residents, the rest seasonal workers.

Leave the city of Oaxaca by the Pan-American Highway east towards the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Pass the American Motors agency, the Goodrich Tire store, the Volkswagen agency, the University stadium, and the General Tire store. Just beyond the Army barracks, leave the pavement and turn right or left. In either case you will enter a neighborhood of rutted dirt roads, many impassable, and a jumble of shops and houses: cane-and-mud huts roofed with corrugated tar-paper; a two-story brick house with glass windows and around it a high stone wall topped with fragments of broken bottles to discourage thieves; and a one-story adobe facing a large dirt patio scrupulously swept. Waste water runs in the streets. Kids stone rats. Dogs hunt in packs. Old cars and trucks stand on blocks. It is like other working-class neighborhoods on the margins of other Mexican cities. In 20 years another ring of similar owner-built houses sheltering newly arrived peasants will push this neighborhood and its people toward the center of the city of Oaxaca. It will have sidewalks and paved streets, a larger school, neon signs, and police patrols. Now turkeys and goats browse around the lamp-posts. In dooryards mothers scold and kids shout, many of them in the Zapotec of San Pedro Mixtepec.

Enter one gate at random and you find a handsome middle-aged San Pedro native directing a team of assistants in the repair of clocks and watches. His shop is immaculate. He and his wife, a beauty from Veracruz, eat from matching plates at a formica table in a well-lighted kitchen equipped with sink, stove, and refrigerator. Greet him in Zapotec and he will laugh with embarrassment. Talk with him about San Pedro and he will marvel that you have been there. His wife asks him: "Then the town where you were born, it is an Indian town?" He answers yes. In the silence that follows, you may wonder that she had not known.

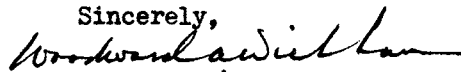
Behind the repair shop, three windowless brick rooms open onto a cement breezeway. Here live two young masons from San Pedro. One brought his wife and son. The other left his wife and two daughters in San Pedro. Why are they

here? The watch-repairman has acted as stepfather to one of the young masons. He rents them these rooms whenever they come to Oaxaca to work, usually four or five months out of the year. The stepson comes to Oaxaca because here he can earn twice what he earns as a mason in San Pedro, where anyway work is scarce for masons. Here he earns 70 pesos a day (US \$5.60), and in San Pedro 40 pesos (US \$3.20). That is the first reason you hear. Chat about other things, listen to the Pedrunos talk, and other reasons emerge. Here his wife will learn a little Spanish, and his son will learn some by playing with mestizo kids. His wife will learn how the gente ("civilized" people) live. She cooks for her family here on a wood fire like the one in San Pedro, and they sleep on mats on a dirt floor as they do at home, but sometimes she helps the watch-repairman's wife in her kitchen, helps her cook, helps her clean house. Soon she will know enough to work as a domestic in a mestizo household. That might add 15 pesos a day (US \$1.20) to the family income. They come to Oaxaca because here there are more things to buy with the extra money they earn. They laugh and say: "Here the money lies very heavy in my pocket. I am kept busy unloading the weight." In Oaxaca, "one can always buy a little piece of meat, some eggs, fruit of all kinds." These seasonal workers rarely make enough money to let them save what they need to live for more than a month or two back in San Pedro. They go home to tend to business in the village, to greet kin and godparents, and to spend their small savings before returning for more wage-work. To make good in Oaxaca, one must live rent-free in his own house, however simple, and get to know the tricks of beating the high cost of living.

Constantino Martinez knows the attraction of Oaxaca, but he says he would rather live in San Pedro. "I no longer have problems in San Pedro. Now that I am alone, the people see me and they know that I do not look for problems anymore. Like the President, did you see how he drank with me? He is a good man. He knows me. This morning I went to give coffee and atole to my daughter-in-law. She is sick from the birth, but she is getting well. I passed the house of Cándido Perez. He is one of the [minority] faction. He says to me, 'If I bring up my complaint at the public meeting, how will you vote?' I tell him, 'Look, as somebody says, I am going to see what is best for the town. You know me. I have family here. I am taking coffee to my daughter-in-law. My sons live here. They have their houses here. I am going to see what is best for the town.'"

But the fact is, the two sons of Constantino Martinez are spending more and more time working in Oaxaca in a relative's carpentry shop. Their Spanish is poor, but it improves with time. They are shy of the city, but the material advantages, especially the possibility of making big money, have turned their heads. Before long they will bring their wives to settle in Oaxaca. Constantino Martinez will probably end up there too.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

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