

A History of Guelaguetza in Zapotec Communities of the Central Valleys of Oaxaca, 16th Century to the Present

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My project studies the evolution of the Zapotec cultural practice of guelaguetza, an indigenous sharing system of collaboration and exchange in Mexico, from pre-Columbian and colonial times to the present. Ironically, the term "guelaguetza" was appropriated by the Mexican government in the 20th century to promote an annual dance festival in the city of Oaxaca that has little to do with the actual meaning of the indigenous tradition. My analysis of Zapotec-language sources from the Central Valley of Oaxaca, written from the 16th to the 18th centuries, reveals that Zapotecs actively participated in the sharing system during this long period of transformation. My project demonstrates that the Zapotec sharing economy functioned to build and reinforce social networks among households in Zapotec communities. I argue that guelaguetza enabled communities of the Central Valley of Oaxaca to survive the trauma of conquest, depopulation, and external demands for local resources. Zapotecs relied on the system to maintain control of valuable community resources, such as property, labor, and agricultural goods. My project also considers how guelaguetza continues to function for Zapotecs outside of Oaxaca, in other parts of Mexico and in the United States, especially in California.

(The project utilizes sources from Mexico, Spain, and the United States, including Spanish- and Zapotec-language legal documents, municipal records, and chronicles, as well as Mexican literature from the early 20th century)

Origins of the Guelaguetza

There is little doubt that the guelaguetza system existed in the pre conquest period, but its exact origins are unclear. As Monte Albán¹ continued to decline in power, Zapotec communities emerged in the Central Valley. Royal marriage ceremonies of Zapotec lords initiated a complex network of gift exchanges that involved many types of products and services from different communities. The reciprocal exchange of gifts and services was practiced in marriages among all households. The royal marriage ceremony, a major feast celebrated by the community, strengthened a network of exchange that governed all relations within Zapotec society. This network is the guelaguetza system.

The Guelaguetza system encouraged Zapotecs across all social classes to participate in a life-long system in which sharing, collaborating and exchanging goods and labor according to one's means formed valuable social ties that connected households within a community. This system of reciprocal exchange succeeded because everyone agreed to rules that applied to all participants, regardless of their class or social standing, and everyone benefited from the system in some way or another. Commoners contributed to the marriage celebration by offering labor or agricultural products, whereas elites might offer prestige goods (*productos de prestigio*). The married couple would repay the goods and services in some way at a later time.

The hosts kept records of the collected gifts, ensuring that each contribution was recorded or remembered, people remembered those who had contributed or paid back guelaguetza debts. Households that failed to pay back debts, were subject to public

¹ ca. 500 BCE-750 CE

shaming and social rejection and, in extreme cases, expulsion from the *queche* (*Zapotec for community*).

Zapotec Traditions under Colonial Rule

Under Spanish rule, the *guelaguetza* system continued to govern the organization of Zapotec activities within the new economy. Zapotecs in Central Valley communities were able to endure colonial demands for resources and labor because of this system. Three aspects of the system that enabled Zapotec communities to maintain collaborative and collective practices that ensured their survival, despite severe setbacks in population and prosperity: fiestas held at life-cycle events such as marriage; community labor or *tequio* projects; and the hierarchical cargo system in which men and women served their communities as elected or appointed officials.

Guelaguetza was especially important in the colonial period because the collective efforts of households served as a means to protect indigenous property and resources. Participation in *guelaguetza* ensured one's continued membership in the community. The obligation to participate might have come as a burden to some people at some point, but *guelaguetza* always benefited the greater community and, in many ways, it was what held people together when depopulation and external demands for resources threatened to destroy the community. People who drifted away from their communities, who sought to create a network of allies that included Spaniards, essentially abandoned the system of mutual support.

Participation in the *guelaguetza* system required men and women to be responsible for each other, and provided a "safety net" for all community members. In times of crisis such as drought, floods, or bad harvests, people worked together to survive. All indigenous communities sustained themselves on agriculture. Thus, an individual's position as landholder gave him or her a special incentive to participate in the *guelaguetza* system because it guaranteed the collective protection of their property. It was not uncommon for entire communities to band together to protect a member's land.

The Practical and Social Functions of *Guelaguetza*

Guelaguetza transactions distributed resources in a practical way and created networks of social support. Refusing to participate in the system, or failing to reciprocate gifts or, would result in one's rejection and potential social isolation. Exchanges took place at the most basic level of society, among households. Exchanges involved small quantities of agricultural products, animals, textiles, or money--once money was introduced and began to circulate among indigenous people, as early as the first generation after the conquest.

Zapotec communities were always concerned with the maintenance and protection of ancestral lands, especially in the colonial period, when Spanish settlers and the church sought to establish haciendas within or near *queche* boundaries. Communal properties were restricted over time, especially in the 18th century. In Zapotec communities, land continued to be more valuable than money. Land and family represented a collective

commitment to survival and sustenance, it meant being part of a community and having their protection and support.

The Enduring Legacy of Guelaguetza

The ancient guelaguetza sharing system continues to play an important role in many contemporary Zapotec communities, despite many changes over the last five centuries. The system's three forms--gift exchange (guelaguetza), labor (tequio), and service (cargos)--continue to organize social relations and activities among Zapotec households.

In 1935, Alberto Vargas published a pamphlet explaining the guelaguetza festivities that took place at “El Cerro del Fortín” in Oaxaca City titled, “Guelaguetza, costumbre racial Oaxaqueña”. To celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Mexican Revolution, the publication sought to highlight the Oaxacan spirit. It described the tradition as “from time immemorial”. The celebration consisted of a meeting, attended by the elders of all of Oaxaca’s regions, who brought with them offerings from their native towns, such as flowers, machetes, food and music. The indigenous attendees exchanged stories, food and regional arts and crafts at the Cerro del Fortín. Today, most people think of the annual Guelaguetza celebration as a tradition of the past. But the event has now been commercialized and sold as a cultural commodity, and it has little to do with the Zapotec tradition of guelaguetza, despite its name.

Despite institutional efforts to erase indigenous language, teachings and traditions, Zapotecs in the Central Valleys have continued to practice guelaguetza. Before their

death, my maternal grandparents, who came from very humble Zapotec families, described their wedding feast:

The celebration lasted seven days. Each day, family, friends and neighbors arrived with bundles of firewood, corn, sugar, eggs, and cacao. The godparents (*padrinos*) were expected to bring them a large metate, a large comal and a wooden chest to guard small valuables. All the gifts were brought before an altar and blessed by the hosting families. During the seven days of festivities, the guests participated in every aspect of the preparations.

The women organized two groups: the younger ones led the grinding of corn for tortillas and the ingredients for the meals; the older women were in charge of preparing the feast, measuring, roasting, cleaning and tasting at every stage of the preparation. Collectively, they ensured that everyone in attendance was fed. The men were also divided into two groups: the younger ones fueled the fires for the tortillas and prepared the pyres for the evening (there was no electricity in the community); the older men carried the plates of food to the tables and offered every guest the ritual bundles of aromatic herbs called "poleo".

Representatives from the groom and bride's families led the ritual speeches and agreed to the division of tasks. The celebration continued with the help of all the attendees who danced or drank at large communal tables. After the wedding celebrations were over, people arrived to collect anything that they had lent for the party. Every guest left the house with small gifts of food. The family recognized the many contributions and prepared to repay these in due time. Many of the symbols described in my grandparent's *guelaguetza* story appear in the old records of my pre-Columbian ancestors.