

## Introduction

Palm Sunday 1997: the sky is electric blue, cloudless on this early morning. I was in the courtyard of San Vicente Ferrer, the parish church, just having returned from the cemetery where I helped the family arrange the armloads of flowers necessary for this day of remembrance. I waited for the arrival of the Palm Sunday procession, winding its way through the streets after distributing palms to all participants at the small chapel of the cemetery. I could hear them now, voices raised in those joyous songs welcoming Christ the King to Jerusalem. The higher pitched voices of children rise above with cries of “Vivo Cristo Rey.” The church behind me is filled with flowers, white gladiolas, dozens of them, jasmine and frangipani scattered at the feet of all the saints. The fragrance swells with the heat of fat beeswax candles. All is ready and the crowd is dancing with anticipation. A scout returns, “They are just turning the corner!”

Then, as if my ears deceive me, I hear the low, elongated notes of funeral songs. Jesús Urbietta, one of a cadre of talented young painters who died in Mexico City two days earlier, is being borne by silent comrades to rest a moment in the Casa de la Cultura where his paintings had often hung. The parish church and the Casa de la Cultura sit next to each other, separated only by a wrought-iron fence. The two processions arrive simultaneously. San Salvador, borne on the shoulders of the men who care for him, heavy garlands of frangipani hang around his neck; jasmine, frangipani blossoms, and petals of roses of Castile rain down on him, making his way sweet. The children in white shirts too big for them wave their palms. Beaming women carry huge vases of white flowers. The Glorias fill the courtyard announcing the happy arrival. Urbietta too is carried on the shoulders of his closest comrades, men who have cared for him. His coffin is heaped high with flowers of the wild (white jasmine, long, rosy palm flowers, tuberose, hibiscus, frangipani) all on a bed of the healing herbs (dill and cordoncillo). Everyone brought jasmine, *guie’ xhuuba’* in Zapotec, in honor of the club Urbietta had founded by that name to help young artists. Urbietta has begun his journey to his new home among the dead. Christ, in the midst of celebration, has begun his death.

—Field notes, March 23, 1997

The Isthmus Zapotec, concentrated primarily in the southern Oaxaca city of Juchitán, are a rarity within Mexico. They have survived 2,500 years of attempts to exterminate them, bring them into submission, assimilate them, and exotize them, to reach a place where they can and do name themselves and claim their place. As do all peoples who persist through shifts and changes in the larger political and economic contexts, the Zapotec have maintained certain fundamental values and outward markers of who they are, while exploiting opportunities—technological, economic, political—that give them a competitive edge in national and global arenas. Theirs is a culture marked by fluidity around a solid core. Over the centuries, this combination has allowed them to bend, rather than break.<sup>1</sup>

### Fundamental Values

Three values are essential to this strategy of calculated change and persistence: community, transformation, and balance. All of these require action to maintain a healthy state. Zapotec is a language of action; people's behaviors and attitudes assume an active stance toward whatever surrounds them. Community, *guendalisaa*, is created only by people's actions. The Zapotec word literally means "making kinship." As people go through their daily lives, they are keenly aware of obligations to make kinship or honor relationships. This value is difficult for Westerners or anyone raised in societies that privilege the individual to grasp. This sense of obligation in no way prevents them from crafting lives that fulfill their own dreams; indeed, the Zapotec community of Juchitán expects innovation and exploration of new areas from its members and sustains them in those endeavors. Such accomplishment can only benefit the community as a whole. Imagine the positive contributions of generations learning all the new technologies and new ways of thinking about old fields, who, at the same time, continue to feel connected and obligated to their home.

Intimately connected to those notions about community is the value of transformation that carries both the meaning of personal change as well as a

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1. After forty-two years of field research with the Isthmus Zapotec of Juchitán, my own association has taken on the same responsibilities and obligations to the living and the dead as theirs. My grandmother, Na Berta Pineda, whose forty-day Mass I have described in chapter 2, was a superb mentor, witty, wise, and always ready to sit and talk, or better, to dance. Her daughter, Na Rosinda Fuentes vda de Ramírez, has taken me into the family as her other daughter. Delia, Rosinda and Chu's daughter, is my sister and my best friend. These women have helped me understand what commitment means, accepting me as the young, inexperienced anthropologist I was in 1967, and now continuing to teach me as I try to give others a sense of what it means to be Zapotec in the twenty-first century. They have loved me unconditionally.

change of substance. Zapotec call people who are wise *binni guenda biaani*. Literally, we could translate this as people (creating) light, or, if we want to reference a broader, Pan-American Indian tradition, they are the people through whom light flows. I know wise people who are bread makers, dancers, poets, healers, prayer leaders, musicians, and cooks. While their occupations and degree of formal education vary wildly, they share certain qualities. They have mastered the craft of what they do—they are artists of making bread or dancing or healing; they are always open to learning new things, thinking of their lives as a process—the healer who was my friend loved to learn about other healing traditions, and as part of his apprenticeship worked with healers in Guatemala; they are not afraid of change, of transformation; they listen and are willing to act as guides for others who seek them out. They believe absolutely in their role as vessels for the light and practice making themselves into the best possible instruments. Finally, they are humble about themselves, believing that the gifts they have are only loaned to them—they do not own them nor do they make any claim to privilege. Not everyone is a *binni guenda biaani*, but everyone knows people who are, respects them, and occasionally goes to them for help. Valuing personal risk-taking and transformation has to have been a strategic advantage, especially as it is embodied in individuals who were women and men and *muxe* (third gender)<sup>2</sup>, formally educated or not, wealthy or poor, and found in all occupations.

Balance is the third and last, and, in some ways, is the value that helps the other two find positive and steady forms, and remain in equilibrium. Ta Feli or Ta Feli Chomo (Felix López Jiménez),<sup>3</sup> the healer with whom I worked most closely, told a wonderful story of the balance of forces on the level of human survival. He talked about the different powers allocated to water and to wind, powers that when in moderation are helpful and when out of proportion are dangerous. Water is a young woman, he said, who, when humans are behaving as they should, sees that they have water necessary for growing crops, for fishing, for drinking, and so on. But when humans do things that upset

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2. The *muxe* have long constituted an important part of Isthmus Zapotec society. When I first began working in Juchitán in 1968, the men who were defined and who defined themselves as *muxe* practiced particular occupations, most notably that of designing and embroidering the regional festive dress, designing the floats, flowers, and decorations for the large fiestas called *velas*, making the little clay figurines called *tanguyú*, making special kinds of bread, and cooking for special occasions. Most did not marry although some did. Of those who did not marry, some were sexually active in homosexual relationships. Some cross-dressed and many more wore the kind of gold jewelry worn by women. This model has changed over the years to include more attributes of Western gay lifestyle.

3. Sadly, Ta Feli died on March 11, 2004. His niece Minerva is keeping the healing alive as well as his *espiritista* temple.

her, she gets angry and causes great floods. It is Wind's job to calm her and make the waters recede. He does this by blowing across the waters, containing them. In the seasonal climate of the region, we see all the possible variations of wind and water, from the disruptive and destructive *bi yooxho* or powerful north wind to the gentle *bi nisa* south or water wind, from rain that supports the crops to rain that periodically floods the city.

This is precisely what happens in the domain of health and illness. Good health is the result of the balance of elements: hot and cold, wet and dry, or emotions such as anger, fear, melancholy. The contrast here between anger and hatred reinforces the importance of balancing strong emotions. Hatred, be *nanna la'dxi'*, literally "it hurts inside," is something that, even though one might direct it toward someone else, it still hurts one. It requires an ongoing and powerful emotion, which is not healthy. Anger is quick to flare and, in the healing process, quick to recede.<sup>4</sup> When one of these is too strong, the person is open to illness, and healing is a matter of restoring the balance. Healers have a whole stock of treatments based on these oppositions. Most Zapotec can also diagnose and recommend treatment that will bring a person back into balance.

Balance, like community and transformation, operates across all domains. So, for example, while Juchitán is famous for its strong, often radical, political positions, the desires and actions of the few who push for political change are tempered by the views of community members who are respected for their knowledge and whose commitment cannot be questioned. How this kind of consultation happens is a good demonstration of the importance of relationships and family. Seeking the opinions of others or the right of family and relatives to offer opinions is not limited to politics. It is the first thing that happens when someone is sick or when someone is contemplating a major personal change. The balance between younger generations who acquire new kinds of expertise and older generations who have a different kind of knowledge is maintained by the implicit acknowledgment of the importance of the community—the city at the largest level, family at the closest to the individual level—and one's obligation to it, at the same time that transformation is also acknowledged and valued. Consensus is not always achieved but inclusive discussion is always expected.

Isthmus Zapotec society lives in this tension between accommodating, indeed, initiating change and sustaining the values and tangible symbols of an ancient tradition even as they change them. The secret of their success is that it has never been an either-or proposition, change or stay the same. Disagree-

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4. In this context, hatred is an emotion that defies the system. *Nanaa la'dxi'* or *duele dentro*, "it hurts inside" is something one does that hurts oneself; hating someone, who usually does not know about it, causes one pain. People do not accept it as a healthy emotion because it requires an ongoing and powerful emotion, which cannot be healthy for anyone. Anger is another order of things. It is quick and one comes back into balance afterward.

ments arise frequently because of deeply felt positions, but they are mediated by the complicated network of relationships.

Death and dying—Zapotec beliefs about them and the ways in which they acknowledge, grieve, act upon, and remember the individuals and the process—can only be understood within the context of community, transformation, and balance. Death is ever-present in the lives of the Zapotec, in ways in which members of many Western societies, ignorant of the trinity of Zapotec values, cannot even begin to imagine. The beliefs and practices represent an amalgam of Zapotec, Western, Roman Catholic, and global influences. One cannot usefully separate one from another because they are not layered in consistent or predictable ways. Who and what the Zapotec are today is the result of centuries of a flexible attitude toward themselves and their global partners, sprung out of the active living of community, of transformation, and of seeking balance. They have not acted precipitously out of the passions or challenges of the moment nor have they been satisfied to remain in the comfort of a way of life that got them by. Their history is not a series of lurches, false starts, reactions, or short-term successes. It is, rather, like a great river that swirls and eddies at the edges as it encounters obstacles and opportunities, but which has a deep and smooth current at its heart. If we do not understand that, then we will understand nothing about what matters, about what it means to be Zapotec. Theirs is not a patchwork culture; neither is it a patched-together culture. Like all persistent peoples, the Zapotec enjoy a way of living that has its own integrity; it has the capacity to surprise itself, at the same time that memory and community provide continuity.

### Domain of Death

Death provides a window onto the working of Zapotec culture and social institutions. What happens in the domain of death is repeated across all domains, lending support to my argument for integrity and consistency. Death also touches people at the most basic level. As René Le Corre observed about Breton death observances, “Religion for the dead is the religion which has survived best today, and it is that which preceded the Catholic faith” (cited in Badone 1989:159). More than birth, marriage, illness, coming of age, indeed, any of the rites of passage, death seems to have some persistent and powerful place in society’s imagination. As Rodney Needham (1973) noted, death is unique among rites of passage because we never can know the final state.

C. Nadia Seremetakis (1992) gives us a thoughtful reflection on two of bodies of theory about death. She examines those who have treated death as one component of an overarching social organization (Durkheim 1947; Bloch and Parry 1982; Huntington and Metcalf 1979) or those, their critics, such as

Rosaldo (1984) and Danforth (1982), who view death as a window onto the affective, emotional domain of individuals. In the first case, death is perceived as an appendage of other social institutions, and in the second is seen as personal and independent of the communal. She suggests that a historical view such as that of Ariès (1981) places death center stage as one of the deep structures of premodern social life. The institution of death, she argues, functions as a space of local resistance to centralizing institutions such as the church and the state (p. 14). Seeing death as part of the deep structure of Zapotec culture allows us to understand that peculiar continuity within transformation that characterizes the history of Juchitán and its people. For our purposes, it provides a point of entry into how and why Zapotec culture has created and sustained itself, while other cultures distant and close have not managed to achieve the same integration and continuity.

### Death in Mexico

Much has been written about death in Mexico, the majority of it concentrated on the Day of the Dead, which has become a mainstay of the tourism industry. Mexican writers such as Octavio Paz have speculated about Mexican attitudes toward death—mocking, challenging, not fearful—and the reasons why it should be so. Popular artists such as José Guadalupe Posada (1852–1913) took death in new directions with startlingly macabre drawings of skulls and skeletons, known as *Calaveras*. His most famous, reproduced everywhere was the *calavera catrina*, a fashionable lady skeleton in a big picture hat. The images were accompanied by verses that fell into the category of political satire. Painters such as Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo incorporated death in their work in both blatant and subtle ways, allowing the observer to uncover multiple meanings. Sergei Eisenstein dedicated the epilogue of his most ambitious and unfinished film, *¡Qué viva México!*, to Posada. Eisenstein himself, like a long list of foreign writers, filmmakers, artists, and social commentators, was responsible for solidifying the idea of Mexicans mocking and celebrating death.

Today much of Mexico becomes a giant commemoration of death on November 1 and 2. All the images beloved by the artists and writers are for sale in markets, large and small, where ordinary wares have been set aside to make way for the accouterments of death—sugar skulls, *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead), decorated candles, cutout tissue paper in Posada-inspired designs, fruit, marigolds, calla lilies, little skulls and images molded from honey and amaranth, carved caskets, altars, whole families of skeletons, cockscomb, incense, coconuts. In the Oaxaca market, I once found skeleton dolls sporting all the regional dresses of Oaxaca's indigenous groups. There is no question that the Day of the Dead is a major holiday throughout Mexico. Chloë Sayer, in her

edited volume (1990) provides colorful evidence of its popularity. It is also true that it was observed for quite some time before it emerged in its present form. Mexican anthropologist Claudio Lomnitz (2005) presents an intriguing ethnohistorical analysis proposing what he calls the “nationalization of death” on the part of the Mexican government as a way of consolidating its power. He also gives us rich material on the domestication of death through family ritual and popular culture. Stanley Brandes (1997, 2003, 2006) traces the history of this major holiday, its influences, and the paradoxes it presents within Mexico and in the United States, where it has become a statement of ethnicity. He also takes up the perplexing issue of the relationship of Day of the Dead to what death means in the Mexican context. More specific to Oaxaca is Kristin Norget’s 2006 book about the Day of the Dead and other death rituals in a neighborhood of Oaxaca City. She also provides an excellent review of the different theoretical approaches to death.

This book will come back to regional and national celebrations of the Day of the Dead and Mexican attitudes about death only infrequently.<sup>5</sup> Its purpose is, rather, to explore Isthmus Zapotec beliefs about death and their ways of acknowledging and remembering it. Drawing on forty-two years of field research in the Isthmus Zapotec city of Juchitán, I juxtapose fine-grained ethnographic descriptions with more general observations of patterns and symbols. I trace the same structures and symbols that surround death across other domains of Zapotec life. Finally, I am concerned to show, through the examination of death and what people say and do about it, the basic integrity of Zapotec culture, how it came to be, and how it persists, reinventing itself as the larger environment changes.

### Historical and Contemporary Practices

All of the sources we can examine to understand pre-Columbian observances of death by the ancestors of contemporary Zapotec—archaeological, ethnohistorical, and historical—indicate that death has always loomed large in the Zapotec worldview, engendering a wide range of practices and beliefs. We know that observances included particular rites for burying the dead as well as communal rites of remembrance. It is worth quoting a passage from Burgoa, virtually in its entirety, because it is such a careful description of one of these communal observances:

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5. For an examination of Day of the Dead and other death rituals in one of the neighborhoods of Oaxaca City, see Kristin Norget’s 2006 book *Days of Death, Days of Life: Ritual in the Popular Culture of Oaxaca*. Norget also provides an excellent review of the different theoretical approaches to death.

On the eve of this lugubrious celebration, they killed a great number of birds, especially turkeys, and dressed them with dry ground pepper, squash seeds, and spearmint leaves or avocado which they cooked for the *totomole*; the turkeys with the ground chile were covered with corn dough, covered with avocado leaves, and put to cook in jars or clay ovens. These were called *petlatamales*, and each family put the ones they had prepared in gourd containers. When night fell, they put them on a table made of cane as an offering for their dead. They prayed to the dead for forgiveness and asked them to return and enjoy the food. They asked them to intercede with the gods whom they served in the other world to bring good crops and good fortune to the living. They knelt in front of the offering, eyes cast down, praying, all night long. They never lifted their heads because if they saw the dead who came, they would be angry and ask the gods to punish them. The next morning, they had a big fiesta and talked about how successful the night's celebration was. They took the food and gave it to strangers or the poor, or not finding anyone, threw it into hidden places. The food was blessed and, having given it to the dead, it would be a great sin to take it back. (Burgoa 1934:391–92)

What Burgoa does not tell us is the location of the night vigil. Setting that aside for the moment, the remainder of his description fits quite closely with contemporary Isthmus Zapotec practice on the Day of the Dead and the days preceding it. Families prepare tamales—of chicken or beef (both of which were Spanish introductions)—some of which go on the altar as food for the dead along with fruit and bread. Prayers are offered in front of the altar for nine days up to and including the Day of the Dead. The prayers include petitions to the Virgin Mary and to Christ on behalf of the departed. On that last day, visitors come and are given tamales and bread. The family offering the altar and the prayers does not eat any of the food. When the altar is taken down, all the food on it is sorted into separate portions, which are sent to those women who had come to pray (see chapter 6 for the extended discussion of these Day of the Dead practices). What makes the Isthmus Zapotec unique is their observance of Day of the Dead in their homes, rather than in the cemeteries as is the case in the rest of Mexico. Juchitecos visit the dead in the cemeteries during Holy Week, an example of reciprocal feasting, one of the fundamental aspects of community.

We have scattered historical accounts of rituals for individuals, and, of course, we have the archaeological sites themselves and their contents, from which we can begin to draw a picture of early practices. Distinctions were made according to the social status or role of the individual. The bodies of kings and princes were carried to Mitla on the shoulders of men, with an honor guard



of the most distinguished nobility. The procession was accompanied by somber music and the laments of the grieving people. A companion would recite the accomplishments of the deceased so that everyone along the route would be reminded. The tombs themselves were subterranean, cruciform structures with niches carved out of the walls of the main room and the cross-spaces. The walls were richly decorated with murals commemorating Zapotec royal ancestors (Marcus 1978:187). The niches were filled with funerary urns—fired clay vessels that represented various personages and that had vaselike containers on the back. Funerary urns and incense burners were placed on the floor of the tomb as well. Grave goods included fine jewels and fabrics and offerings of copal.

Most people were buried with less pomp and material goods, but their tombs were also subterranean and the walls were plastered over with a kind of stucco. Stone steps led down into the tomb so that relatives could come and make their offerings of food and drink, copal, flowers, and maize.

Ancestor worship was one of the important features of pre-Columbian Zapotec society. The dead were buried under patios close to the living. The departed were visited regularly by their relatives and brought gifts of food, fine goods, flowers, and drink. Their images appeared in murals in the tombs and perhaps also in the anthropomorphic funerary urns. Altars, called *pecogo* in pre-Columbian Valley Zapotec, were close by the tombs and were the locus of family observances.

All of these elements are present in contemporary belief and practice. The procession of the body of Jesús Urbietta, which began this chapter, would not have been out of place in pre-Columbian Mitla. Departed relatives, images kept close to the family on the home altar, are consulted often for advice as well as for intercession with God and the saints. The further distant from death they are, the more their lives and words take on aspects of *binni guenda biaani*’ whose wisdom serves as a prescription for action. Poet Enedino Jiménez (2004) captures this strong attachment when in his poem “Siado’ guie’” (“The Flower of Dawn”) he writes about the voice of the ancestors—*xtiidxá ca rigola za*—awakening understanding. Every Thursday and Sunday the cemeteries are filled with people bringing flowers and company to their departed relatives. Photographs in tombs and altars are a constant reminder of family members absent through death. And the altar itself in its full communal presentation during the Day of the Dead is called *biguié*’ (spirit-flower), a continuation of the old *pecogo*.

### Values and Zapotec Death

Dying is a gradual process of becoming dry, wetness being an essential property of the living. The departed then is transformed from some being that is *nayaa*

(wet, green, fresh) to a being which is *nabidxi* (dry). All the flowers, water, willow branches, banana leaves, and green cocos that figure in the funerary rites throughout the first two years are *nayaa* and function to make the deceased's journey a smooth and gradual one rather than an abrupt transformation. In addition to the body's physical transformation from wet to dry, the deceased also is moved from the space of the living to the appropriate living space of the dead—the cemetery. Again, this is accomplished over considerable time broken into periods each with its own set of rituals—the nine days of prayer, the forty days of mourning followed by a Mass, the Mass on the first anniversary, then again on the seventh, the two years of Day of the Dead altars, and the Holy Week visits to the cemeteries.

Wetness and dryness, life and death are not limited to the Isthmus Zapotec. In the Greek village where Seremetakis (1990) conducted her examination of death, the dead person is referred to as *xerós*, which means dried out or stale in standard Greek. *Xerénome* means I am drying out, I am dying, that is to say, I am drying out due to aging, extreme cold or heat, hard work, crying (p. 179). These people practice a double burial, that is, defleshed bones are exhumed and “reburied” in an ossuary. Such is not the contemporary Zapotec practice though there is some evidence that it was common for high-status individuals in pre-Columbian times. S. C. Humphreys (1993:178), in her notes on the several studies that comprised an earlier edition, observes that an association of water with life and dryness with death occurred frequently across a disparate range of societies. She also notes the complexity of these associations and their distinctiveness. Juchitán adds yet another way of looking at water and dryness and its relationship to death and life.

In Juchitán, the dead person remains part of the community. All of the observances listed previously and the weekly cemetery visits to replenish flowers and water, the tending to the home altar with its photograph of the dead—all these indicate that the dead are very much connected to family and the larger community. Perhaps the clearest demonstration is the reciprocity involved in the dead being invited to the homes of the living on Day of the Dead and the living being invited to the homes of the dead during Holy Week. There is no difference between this and the reciprocal feasting that takes place continually among the living. How much the dead are treated as members of the community can be seen in the ways in which children or young, unmarried adults are acknowledged in death. In both these cases, fireworks accompany the body and livelier songs are played to take the place of the wedding that they will not have. The community is honoring the responsibilities it would have had toward them had they lived.

Balance characterizes the process of mourning as well as the attitude toward the feelings of the departed. In the first hours after death when the body is laid out in front of the home altar, relatives and friends come to pay their respects. Weeping and lamenting the death are expected and appropriate. Sometimes

mourners may be so overcome that they throw themselves on the coffin or cry uncontrollably. There is a point past which such behavior is regarded as too much and people will step in, trying to calm the person, gradually leading him away to a quiet place. Grieving may be bound at some level by codes of behavior, but it is and should be a very personal response. The work of musicians and prayer leaders in these contexts weaves a fabric of notes and words that holds people in a safe space. Musicians understand their work at wakes and memorials to be directed toward both the living and the dead, singing the dead along their way and holding them in the grief of the living. Prayer leaders define their work as much more than reciting prayers; they hold the people together in their grief, making a proper space in which they can mourn without disrupting the important work of transformation and passage (see chapter 3).

Just as there is this sensitivity toward the living who have suffered a loss, there is the same sensitivity toward the dead who, after all, are now in a liminal place, neither living nor dead. People understand the sadness, indeed, the literal sense of dislocation, felt by the departed and balance the spirit's need for companionship and familiar surroundings with the need to begin the process of separation. There is a real concern that the dead, in their cemetery homes, be happy, and conversations will often include reference to how appreciative the deceased was for the flowers and the visit. *Espiritistas* have the ability to call up the spirits of the dead and, in fact, do so regularly around the Day of the Dead. People go on the chance that their family member might be one of the passing spirits bringing a request that they will need to honor. Several adepts of the spiritista temple go into a trance state (*se duerman*), working one at a time. Another member of the temple is there to interpret and provide guidance for the people who have come. Three older men stand to one side, acting as spirit-bouncers. When there is an unhappy, bad, or mischief-making spirit, they may distract it, make it leave. The initial response, however, is always to try to discern what has caused the spirit to feel so helpless, aggrieved, or angry. The arriving spirits speak through the adept, and after an exchange of greetings and establishing who the spirit is, the spirit is asked what he wants. The first answer, in almost every case, is a drink of water. It is assumed that he is thirsty because he has been walking, but it may also be that his family has not been keeping fresh glasses of water on the home altar. Other quite specific requests may be made.

In a sense, the novena and the entire forty days of prayers become a grace period, with the spirit still there, close to the home altar, embodied in the flower body laid out on the floor, listening to the prayers, smelling the flowers, and drinking their moisture. The last lifting up of the flower body and the Mass on the fortieth day tell the spirit that it now has to go to its new home. Little crosses made from palm leaves are placed in the windows to discourage the spirit from returning but, at the same time, a votive candle burns day and night in front of the altar, a light for the dead.

### Structural Oppositions

Certain fundamental oppositions run throughout Zapotec culture and become foregrounded in beliefs about death and the rituals that embody belief. These are wet (*nayaa*) and dry (*nabidxi*) on the one hand, and wild (*gui'xhi*) and town (*guidxi*), on the other.<sup>6</sup> In moments such as death or a serious illness, these oppositions are either out of balance or are in transition from one state to another. Whatever the state, these moments must be treated carefully because the consequences of doing nothing or doing a ritual improperly are grave. The fact that these oppositions, or rather, the symbols that stand for them, are at the heart of much Zapotec song, poetry, and painting highlights their importance and provides further evidence of their centrality to Zapotec culture.

#### *Wet*

The living, young girls, flowers (especially those of the wild) the sea, the south wind, and *bi nisa* (water wind)—all these are quintessentially wet and are imbued with positive qualities. We have already seen instances of this quality being invoked in practices having to do with death, and we will examine them and others in greater detail in subsequent chapters. One is wettest at birth and life is a process of gradually drying out; death hastens that process somewhat, explaining the need for “wet” objects and ritual because the dead are in greater need of it. Young girls have all the good qualities of freshness—they are described in conversations, literature, and song as *nayaa* (fresh), *nanaxhi* (sweet-smelling), and *nagá'* (*frondoso*—lush or leafy). The *traje bordado* (embroidered skirt and huipil) especially but not exclusively appropriate for unmarried girls is embroidered with flowers of all colors, shapes, and sizes. The girls are flowers. Married women can retain the quality of *nagá'* or lushness. Dieting or losing weight through illness robs one of that quality. I made one trip to Juchitán after a successful diet and was told that when I came before I was *nagá'* and beautiful. Now I was *naguundu'* (wilted or dried up), and so I needed to eat more. Thinness is associated with being dry once one is an adult woman. Young boys are not described in these terms nor do they figure in the songs or painting.

Most flowers and many fruits have the quality of being *nayaa*. Those that have it in greater abundance are those that are found in the wild or *gui'xhi'*. Rosinda told me about gathering fruit and flowers from the wild when she

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6. In addition to these, hot (*nandá'*) and cold (*nananda*) provide an opposition that characterizes certain beliefs and practices, particularly in the area of illness and healing. Because they are not as well-integrated and are limited to only a few domains, I regard them as later notions that have been incorporated in those areas where they supplement the other oppositions or certain important values. An underlying explanation might be that the seasonal variations that are recognized in the Isthmus have to do with wet and dry rather than with hot and cold.

was a child—wild cherries, icaco or *pépe* (fruit of a local tree), guayaba, wild figs, nanche, sugar cane, several kinds of jasmine, cordoncillo, frangipani, palm flower, *guie' bi'chi'* (dragon's blood), and basil. Willow branches are also important for certain death observances. There is also a wonderful flower of legend—*mudubina*, a kind of water lily. Women make necklaces of them by taking one long-stemmed blossom and folding and peeling the stem so that it makes two strands with the flower at its center. They fasten the ends and wear it around their necks with the blossom in front. It feels remarkably cool and wet, especially welcome in the hot climate that characterizes most of the year. The other flower that is worn around the neck is the frangipani or *guie' chaachi*. Individual blooms are strung and the strings are tied to make a necklace—these are adornments of both saints and humans. Their freshness and sweet smell are said to have great healing properties.

Water (*nisa*), of course, is *nayaa*, but the sea (*nisadó'*), and the rain (*nisa guie*), are especially so. This is to be expected because both are climatological forces of significance for the continued well-being of Juchitán. The other major climatological element with this wet property is the south wind (bi nisa), literally “water wind.” This is the gentle (and female) wind that comes off the Pacific bringing much-needed rain, and not the inundations that are more likely to come from the north particularly during the summer hurricane season. This wind and the rains it brings characterize the season the Isthmus Zapotec call *gusiguié* (“rainy season,” literally, “season of flowers”). All these manifestations of water appear again and again in literature and painting. We can also trace them back to the earliest symbols that appear at the ancient site of Monte Albán I (500 BCE–100 BCE), in particular, glyph C, so named by Mexican archaeologist Alfonso Caso in 1928, and associated with water in its different manifestations.<sup>7</sup> For example, in its simplest form, it has wavy or zigzag lines that represent water. It is also associated with the day-sign Water (Leigh 1974).

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7. Alfonso Caso was the Mexican archaeologist who excavated the pre-Hispanic city of Monte Albán. In his 1928 study of Zapotec hieroglyphs, he named one that appears most frequently and consistently through all the stages of Monte Albán, glyph C. Following earlier writers, Caso believed the glyph to represent a stylized jaguar, and his interpretation held sway for many later writers. Howard Leigh (1974), in his careful reconstruction of the evolution of glyph C, finds no evidence of anything other than water and water-aspects associated with this glyph. Leigh describes the simplest form of the glyph as having undulations or zigzags that represent water; it is also sometimes associated with the day-sign Water (*Nisa*, in Zapotec). In Monte Albán IIIa (200–500 CE), the day-sign for Alligator (*Chila*, in Zapotec) appears in conjunction with glyph C, leaves, and flowing double streams. Alligator is the first day of the Mesoamerican calendar and is also referred to as Sky Monster. Marcus and Flannery (1996) describe *Cociyo* or Lightning as the most powerful and sacred of the forces in the early Zapotec universe. Lightning's companions include Clouds (*Zaa*), Rain (*Niça Quiye*), Wind (*Pèe*), and Hail (*Quiezabi*). The other major set of forces was associated with Earth (p. 19). A cosmos with supernatural forces such as these is what one would expect of an agricultural society, especially one living in the physical environment of the Valley of Oaxaca.

*Dry*

Old people, the dead, the ancestors, tuberculosis, toads, and the north wind—these are all examples of dryness. In some cases, this is part of a natural process and not regarded as bad, as in old people whose other qualities such as wisdom and transformation compensate the dry state of their bodies, and the ancestors who continue to intercede and provide models of proper behavior for the living. Ancestors are so dry as to be beyond any negative sense attached to dryness. Diseases such as tuberculosis are obviously bad because they accelerate the process of becoming dry in an unnatural manner. Toads (*bidxi*) embody an unpleasant dryness, whereas frogs (*bidxi ñee gaa*) are wet. Toads loom large in the literature and painting, including the Classic Period murals at the site of Cacaxtla. They appear frequently in the paintings of Francisco Toledo who calls Juchitán his home. The north wind has a season named for it, the season of the *nisadó'*, *nortes*. This is a fierce, drying wind that howls across the Isthmus from north to south for five or six months of the year. With its dry, sometimes gale-force winds, it brings the onset of colds, bronchitis, eye diseases, and chronic coughs. In Zapotec, it is the *bi yooxho* or the “old wind,” and is thought of as male. The season characterized by *nortes* is called *gusibá* (“season of the tomb”). Together, the year is divided between the rainy season or *gusiguié* and the dry season or *gusibá*. Two major communal celebrations mark the beginnings of the two seasons: Holy Week or *Nabaana Ro* (“time of great mourning”) initiates the *gusiguié*, whereas the Day of the Dead signals the beginning of the *gusibá*.

*Wild*

The wild—the uncultivated, unworked land, mountains, caves, rivers, and the sea—is where one goes for knowledge. The rabbit stories, once a mainstay of tales told to children, epitomize this belief. Rabbit is set a task and he goes to the wild—a cave or the monte—to find the solution. When healers “travel” in their minds to find the causes of someone’s illness or to augment their knowledge of illness, health, and healing, they go to the wild. Ta Feli, the healer I knew best, would describe rivers with their rushing waters and banks of lush foliage or sometimes the inside of a huge mountain as places he was drawn to by his *cumplimiento*, or vocation as a healer, and as someone whose dedication kept the world from tipping to the side of evil. The wild is inhabited by certain flowers (those listed here as the wettest), nondomesticated animals—jaguar, iguana, armadillo, snakes, turtles, deer, wildcats, monkeys, rabbits, and some birds—eagles, hawks, ravens, owls, and the water ouzel or *bere lele*. The wild is both a place of danger and a place of wisdom. Children are admonished

not to wander near riverbanks or caves or the *monte* because that is where the *duendes* (mischievous spirits who appear as small people) gather. Unhappy or lost spirits of the dead may be there too, or *bidxaa* (a kind of witch who turns into an animal and causes harm to people) who frequent the wild, but especially crossroads on the edges of inhabited places.

There used to be more of the wild but as Juchitán expands, adding more and more suburbs, and other cities grow, the wild has become more circumscribed. The category remains an important one, however, remaining very much alive in people's imaginations. One bird, the bere lele, illustrates the deep import of the wild-tame opposition. The bird is basically wild but will allow itself to be "tamed" by one person. They are scarce so, while many people would like to have one, few in fact do. And the bird, when it bonds, does so with only one person. They have a song, more, a cry, which consists of notes cascading downward. The blind Juchiteco flute player, Cenobio López, composed a piece called "Bere lele," which imitates this cry. When the owner dies, the bird begins this cry, refuses to eat or drink, and almost always dies, despite the heroic efforts of relatives. The first time I encountered this was at the death of Don Silahyn, an old man who had been one of Ta Chu's goldsmiths. At the moment of his death, his bird crawled under his bed and began its lament. It tried to follow the funeral procession but was kept back. His daughter-in-law took it with her to Coatzacoalcos where it died three weeks later. The second encounter was on Good Friday at the Capilla de la Misericordia to which Christ's body is taken after his descent from the cross. I was sitting in the chapel with Delia when I heard those same notes. It was a bere lele in the patio of the adjoining house. The bird figures in painting, literature, and music. Indeed, Zapotec think of themselves as being like the bere lele, essentially wild, but willing to live in community, on their terms.

Before the Spanish arrived, there were only three domesticated animals—the turkey, the honeybee, and a dog that the Aztec bred for food. Most animals, then, fell into the wild category. Many of them were hunted for food—iguana, armadillo, rabbit, deer, and turtle both for its flesh and its eggs. Although the supply is decreasing, all of these are still an important part of the Zapotec diet, supplementing beef, pork, chicken, and all manner of fish. The Foro Ecológico (Ecological Forum) has begun a program of breeding and raising iguanas to bring their numbers back to the abundance of an earlier time. Foro personnel also instruct Juchitecos on how to raise their own iguanas.

### *Tame or Town*

Cultivated land, the town, domestic animals (cows, pigs, cats, dogs, domesticated birds such as chickens and turkeys), Western medicine, cultivated flowers usually

trucked in from Puebla of Mexico City—these, in addition to innovations such as movies, videos, computers and Internet cafes—are all town things. What is interesting about this category is that everything in it is essential for the contemporary Zapotec way of life as part of a Mexican and global economy. Cultivated land and domesticated animals allow a degree of stability and predictability that is simply not possible under the conditions that characterize the wild. It is what makes community possible, and without community Juchitecos would never have been able to maintain and develop their sense of a unique identity. Revered local writer Andres Henestrosa retells a legend of how the Zapotec avoided capture and enslavement by one of the pre-Conquest Empires. They all gathered in a huge circle, and, accompanied by flute and drum, danced, individuals and small groups leaving the circle until finally no one was left. Only by dispersing could they avoid capture, but they honored the community that bound them by coming together in one last dance.

As with everything else about Zapotec culture, both the wild and the town are necessary for people's sense of well-being. It is, in fact, those things of the wild that make daily life more interesting, especially the fruits, flowers, and animals. Those same things make it possible to heal, to commemorate the dead, and even to make *velas*<sup>8</sup> truly Zapotec. It may be too that one might find the home of the ancestors, the *binni gulá'sa'* (the Cloud People), there in the wild.

The dead must negotiate the transition between these two realms, finally coming to rest in their home in the *gui'xhi'*, in time to become ancestors. The multilayered, complex set of rituals surrounding dying, death, and the dead make the transition possible. When they are observed properly, the transition is slow and smooth, allowing the souls to remain part of the living community while they are slowly joining the community of the dead.

### Rituals

Observances and practices having to do with death fall into two kinds—communitywide and those of individual families. Both kinds involve reciprocity, transformation, display, and balance. For both, any single death begins a cycle of observances that lasts at least seven years and possibly more, depending on the sentiments of family members.

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8. *Velas* are one of the most important symbols of being an Isthmus Zapotec. They are annual fiestas that include a vespers service and a Mass, a parade, an all-night dance, and a daytime dance. Each family belongs to a *vela* society and, in the year preceding the four days of festivities, engages in preparations ranging from decision-making meetings to sending out the invitational bread to collecting the required donations. The all-night dance requires the most formal of the regional *traje* for women and black slacks and a white shirt for men.



### *Community Rituals*

Two large communitywide and reciprocal commemorations of death occur every year. One occurs during the Day of the Dead and All Saints and the other during Holy Week. In the first, the dead are invited back to the homes of their living families. In the second, the living are invited to visit the dead in their cemetery homes. The reciprocity here is exactly the same as that one finds in the round of fiestas, velas, weddings, baptisms, and so forth. An invitation obligates one to attend and to reciprocate. The Holy Week rituals and visiting parallel Christ's entrance into Jerusalem described at the beginning of this chapter and his death on the cross. He is mourned in the same way as a beloved Zapotec ancestor. The existence of the two celebrations, the details of the practices, the extension into other realms of Zapotec society argue for a very old, pre-Hispanic origin. The Holy Week rituals are unique to the Isthmus Zapotec as are certain elements of the Day of the Dead observances.

These two celebrations require not only the participation of the living mourners and the dead, but also hundreds of others who bake the special bread;<sup>9</sup> acquire and sell the flowers; cut and cart banana stalks, banana leaves, and coconuts to market; clean the tombs and build the altars; walk the Via Crucis (Stations of the Cross); lead the prayers; dress and care for the saints; make thousands of tamales; and cook up batch after batch of *dxinã'*, the syrupy fruit confections especially appropriate for Holy Week. Lately, it also includes outsiders who set up trampolines and other amusements for the children. These are ordinary people, Juchitecos and outsiders, priests and lay priests, who shift into high gear to make these celebrations possible and beautiful.

### *Family-based Observances*

Families participate in the communitywide observances, but they are also involved in cycles of commemorations within their own family and extended

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9. Bread, in Juchitán, comes in many forms. Some of those carry no special significance—*bolillos* (hard rolls) or *pan Bimbo* (white bread) both of which may be used for sandwiches, or *pan dulce* (sweet bread) that, together with sweetened coffee, usually comprises the light evening meal. Bread, the making of it, the giving and receiving of it, takes on great significance in observances having to do with death. Six kinds of special bread are associated with death ritual that will figure in the chapters that follow. This is a brief introduction to them: *pan de muerto* (bread of the dead)—a thick round or oval loaf decorated with a cross, tear-drops or bones made of dough; *roscas*—a ring-shaped roll or pastry, sweet, for use on the altar; *marquesote*—sweet bread in a rectangular shape, decorated with egg white writing the name of the deceased, also part of the altar; *yemita*—a small, round bread with lots of egg yolks, sweetened, given to guests; *pan bollo*—a roll, a slightly rounded square shape, given in twos to guests; *torta*—a large rectangular bread characterized by more fat and sugar than any other of the special breads, given as part of Masses for the dead to the guests.

family. These begin with the death of a family member and the laying out of her body in front of the home altar. Ideally, this happens in two stages; in the first, the departed loved one is dressed and laid briefly on the floor then on a cot; in the second, she is transferred to a coffin also in front of the altar. The funeral follows and initiates nine days of prayers in the altar room with a *ba' yaa* (moist, green, fresh body) laid where the coffin had been. The chief mourner stays in that room for forty days, people coming and going, expressing their condolences, bringing flowers and candles. The end of the forty days is marked by a Mass, followed by a gathering at the home, and a last round of prayers. Another Mass marks the year anniversary, and the last marks seven years. Some people have fifteen- or twenty-year Masses; some like to mark every year up to and including the seventh. In addition to these practices, families visit the cemetery with fresh flowers and glasses of water every day for the first forty days and then every Thursday and Sunday thereafter. Someone in the household must tend to the altar at home, changing the flowers, the votive candles, and making sure a glass of water is available for the spirits.

A network of relationships involves individuals in these practices of relatives and friends so that some death-related observance will require a person's attention at least once a week, usually more often. There is no appropriate age at which involvement begins; young children attend wakes and funerals, carry flowers and pictures in processions, and girls may be drafted to tend the altars. Even though the practices are complex and marked off, the fact of death is natural, and its domain all-encompassing.

### Death in Literature and Painting

Given the pervasive nature of death in Zapotec society, it would be strange not to find it occupying a central place in art. The images are quite different from the Posada calaveras or the rhymes that accompanied them. They spring from the complicated web of beliefs, actions, and symbols that surround death. Death figures prominently in the work of internationally known artist, Francisco Toledo. He painted processions of elephants led by skeletons. Sometimes, he drew skeletons draped with a toad. Images of the wild, juxtaposition of dryness and wetness, abound in his work.

Although like Francisco Toledo and Rufino Tamayo, many of the younger Juchiteco artists have been trained in conservatories in Mexico and abroad, the themes most of them choose to depict have deep connections with themes that define Zapotec culture and much of that is iconography connected to death. Here not only is death itself depicted, but also those symbols associated with it—flowers and water paramount among them, but also symbols of the more general dichotomy between things of the wild and things of the city.

Wild and tame is a particularly important distinction. It symbolizes how Zapotec feel about their own character and underlies many of the practices associated with death. The parallel they draw between the bere lele, a kind of water bird, a bittern, and themselves is perhaps culturally the most fundamental statement of this tension between being of the wild with all its freedom and danger, and being of the community with its restrictions and safety.

Zapotec paintings turn on the balance between wild and tame, of the wild and of the town, individual, and community. In the specific symbols, they also embody the tension between wet and dry. Birds, fish, iguanas, and toads both surround human figures and are part of them. Women have bird heads, become fish, and metamorphose into iguanas. Men in black hats are dogged by ominous black birds. Painters transgress the boundaries between wild and tame all the time. There are very few “homely” paintings, no communal dance scenes as in Brueghel, no representation of everyday activities. Zapotec paintings are bursting with animal and human life. The animals that fill Zapotec art tend to be animals of the wild, and mostly but not exclusively animals that are the favorites of autochthonous peoples—snakes, fish, toads, bats, the trickster, and sexual icon rabbit or hare, iguanas, birds, especially the bere lele, but also the ubiquitous zanate. Insects and shellfish were the favorites of Toledo—wasps, scorpions, grasshoppers, crickets, crabs, and shrimp. When “domestic” animals are depicted, they are often those associated with bidxaa, of the sort that can turn themselves into animals—pigs, large black dogs, horses. Even here, one does not know where the boundaries are—is this simply a pig or is it a bidxaa?

Human depictions include both women and men, but rarely children. In virtually all the paintings, with the exception of some done for commercial spaces such as bus terminals, people have some oddity about them. They transgress the boundaries between the real and the bizarre. Francisco López Monterrosa often paints large-busted, big-nosed women in profile. Their hair is a stream of fish, and they might move through water surrounded by fish, crabs, and shrimp. Their feet are hooves. Toledo’s *Mujer iguana* (*Iguana Woman*) is exactly that—a nude woman wearing high-heeled shoes whose head is that of an iguana and whose back has a scaly ridge. In Jesús López Martínez’s *El conjuro de Sapandú* (*The Incantation of Sapandú*), a woman sits at the edge of the sea; fish swim up to her and become birds flying off from her head. Oscar Martínez’s paintings are filled with men wearing fedoras, people whose torsos are flowers, men whose limbs are often reassembled in odd ways. Victor Cha’ca’ gives little wings to humanlike figures who appear as angels or flying insects.<sup>10</sup>

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10. *Cha’ca’* is the Zapotec word for woodpecker; because Victor Cha’ca’ began his career as a wood-carver, he was given this nickname. He signs his work both as Cha’ca’ and as Chaca.

Flora is surprisingly limited in the work of Juchiteco painters. Landscapes are nonexistent as are still lifes that feature flowers or fruit. The exceptions are significant—corn, frangipani, and a stylized heart-shaped fruit sometimes shown in cross-section, and often with a spray of water or foliage erupting from the top. The corn plants are young, some at the tasseled stage, and they frequently incorporate a human face. In another of Jesús López Martínez's Sapandú drawings, a young woman is curled inside the seed of a corn plant. These are fairly close renderings of the ancient Zapotec tradition of the Young Corn God who is slain and then reborn. A slightly different variation is Jesús Urbietta's powerful *El lobo y la milpa* (*The Wolf and the Cornfield*). The wolf is fierce, clearly a creature of the wild, but with human eyes and nose. The corn plants are tasseled and one springs from a heart-shaped seed. When frangipani appear, they are usually single blossoms, just as they are frequently used in ceremonial observances.

Two examples incorporate all three symbolic categories. One is a vignette by Soid Pastrana called *El guerrero* (*The Warrior*). This shows a man's torso in profile. His heart is a bere lele, and on the crown of his head sits another bird. He is surrounded by four sprouting seeds, at least one of which is a corn plant. The other Pastrana created as the invitation to the 2001 Vela Pineda. At the top center of the drawing is the face of a Juchiteca wearing the white starched lace headdress in the manner one uses for church. She is flanked by two iguanas. Beneath her is a turtle facing upward. The turtle is flanked by four frangipani blossoms each attached to their leaf. It is a remarkable incorporation of all the significant Zapotec imagery. These images are not pan-Mexican; they are specifically Zapotec, images of an autochthonous people—turtles, toads, snakes, iguanas. These are images that signify emergence from the earth and a return to it. The Young Corn God who is sacrificed and returns to life appears in many forms, in paintings, and on house murals.

In the same way, death appears in poetry and literature, couched in terms of wild and tame, of liminal figures, of wetness, fragrance, and flowers. Juchitán has long been a cradle for the arts, not only painting and music, but also the literary arts. Carlos Montemayor (2005), in his pathbreaking work together with Donald Frischmann on Mesoamerican indigenous languages, wrote, "the Zapotecs of the Isthmus have created what is arguably the most important modern literary tradition of all the indigenous languages of Mexico" (p. 2). Gabriel López Chiñas (1911–1983), Andrés Henestrosa (1906–2008), Nazario Chacón Pineda (1916–1994), and Pancho Nacar (Francisco Javier Sánchez Valdivieso; 1909–1963) established an impressive literary movement writing in their native language in the first half of the twentieth century. Continuing that tradition but now linked to the populist political movements, most notably the Coalición Obrera, Campesina y Estudiantil del Istmo, already hinted at in 1971, but which burst on the scene in 1974, were local writers such as

Macario Matus and Victor de la Cruz.<sup>11</sup> A new generation has emerged: Irma Pineda Santiago, Natalia Toledo, Victor Terán, and Enedino Jiménez, among others, who continue to give voice to the political and cultural consciousness of the Isthmus Zapotec. Poets commemorate the deaths of friends, such as poet Enedino Jiménez writing of the death of Francisco Toledo's mother, using all the symbols of wetness and flowers that one finds in the death rituals themselves. Jiménez's more abstract poem about the blurred or nonexistent boundaries between death and life is the appropriate frontispiece to this work.<sup>12</sup> Irma Pineda, in a magnificent work of translation, made available to Spanish-speakers much of the important poetry of Pancho Nácar (Pineda Santiago 2007). The subjects he chose to write about ranged widely but were grounded in the imagery of flowers, fragrance, water, the wild, and the mysticism of transformation. More directly connected to death is his "Xandu' yaa" ("First Offering"). In her own rich poetry, Irma Pineda (2005) employs the same imagery speaking to matters of living and dying. In "Bedandá guendaguti lii" ("Death Surprised You"), she writes eloquently of what it means for a Zapotec to die far away from her homeland (p. 51). Victor de la Cruz, mentor for many of the contemporary writers, plays with both images and language in poetry that conveys meaning at many levels. His "Chupa si diidxá" ("Just Two Words"), in two short stanzas, encapsulates the turning of the seasons at the end of October, the rituals of

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11. An excellent account of the Coalición Obrera, Campesina y Estudiantil del Istmo (COCEI), based on written sources but more importantly on extended interviews of the major figures in the movement, is *Autonomía de los zapotecos del istmo* by Gabriela Kraemer Bayer and published in 2008 by the Universidad Autónoma Chapingo. She sets the rise of this political movement not only within the context of other 1960s protest movements in Mexico, but also more globally. It was not the first populist political movement originating in Juchitán and most probably will not be the last but it did bring together political figures, artists, and writers in a heady mix that led not only to the COCEI but also to the creation of the *Lidxi Guendabianni* (Casa de la Cultura) in 1971.

12. Maestro Jiménez died August 27, 2004, while a volume containing this and other poems was being produced. Sadly, then, the volume *Ti guchacht cuxooñé guidxilayú: Una iguana recorre el mundo* became a posthumous publication. It is bilingual in both Zapotec and Spanish. I first met Maestro Jiménez in 2002. One of my friends in Juchitán told me that if I were interested in poetry, I had to meet Enedino. She was quite right. We went to his house one evening and talked about poetry. He clearly loved writing and was gracious in talking about it. He read perhaps ten of his poems to us, holding us mesmerized by the beauty of the sound and the power of the content. It is a rare poet who can craft both sound and content equally well. I told him that I would like very much to translate his poetry into English, working perhaps toward a trilingual publication. He was intrigued by the idea and gave me copies of a dozen poems to render into English. The poems in this book are among those I heard him read that memorable evening. His widow, Na Enilda Vasquez, has also given me her permission to translate and publish these poems of her late husband, believing in the beauty and importance of his poetry. He was a rare poet and a generous soul. I hope that these translations give the reader some sense of his craft and that they may seek out the posthumous volume.

the Day of the Dead, and the tenderness of a lost love (in Montemayor and Frischmann 2005:44).

Isthmus Zapotec writers, poets, and painters create out of their profound knowledge of Zapotec culture, imagery, and language opening a window of understanding for us. Nowhere is this more clear than when they speak about dying and living.

### Conclusion

Death pervades all domains of Zapotec culture. It touches the lives of everyone living in the community and those distant from it. It binds the living together in belief and commemoration. It redefines the relationship between the living and the dead. It connects the living to all the ancestors, the *binni gula'sa'* (Cloud People), before them. Children learn the meaning of death and its symbols through both family and community rituals and in poetry, song, and paintings. Through death, the Zapotec are reminded of the values that have bound and sustained them for 2,500 years—community, transformation, and balance. They are made mindful of those oppositions that frame their sensibilities of who they are. In the daily practice and the large communal celebrations of the dead, the Zapotec understand who and why they are. Without these promptings, people can become so lost in the everyday getting by that they forget the larger purpose that gives them integrity as a people.

### A Note on Method

Between 1967 and 2008, I have made twenty-nine field research trips to Juchitán, ranging from one year in 1971–1972 to months to several weeks. I have been there seven times during *Semana Santa*, four times during the *Via Crucis*, and five times during the *Día de los Muertos*. On virtually every visit, I have attended one or more commemorations of individual deaths. I maintain a lively relationship with my closest family through weekly and monthly telephone calls. And through e-mail and shared photo files, I keep in touch with the younger generation.

I have photographed the city, its events, and Juchitecos since 1974, chronicling changes both in people and places. My husband, Ronald R. Royce, documented the city through photographs, diagrams, and maps during our 1971–1972 visit. I have also videorecorded *velas*, parades, *binni guenda biaani'* talking about their craft, and the city since 1991, accumulating some forty hours of video. So, in terms of visual documentation of Juchitán and Juchitecos, I have a continuous record over forty-two years. I have no photographs or film

for some events having to do with death, namely, funerals and events occurring during the first forty days. I have respected the sensitivities of my friends and family in this regard. I have recorded each of these observances I have attended, however, with drawings and diagrams in my field notebooks.

Other forms of documentation include field notes; transcripts of interviews; linguistic material beginning with a grammatical frame, and then covering vocabulary across several domains; acquisition of local newspapers, journal issues, and books by local authors in Zapotec and Spanish as well as locally available articles and books about the city and the region; surveys of changes in the physical appearance of the city, including new businesses; acquisition of art produced by local painters, printmakers, and sculptors, both large gallery works as well as invitations, announcements, and posters for events; and similarly, collecting recordings by Isthmus Zapotec musicians and composers, from LPs to DVDs. I have also collected examples of the crafts in which the Juchitecos excel from woven palm to hammocks to pottery. I researched, documented, and collected women's traje (Zapotec forms of dress), acquiring one example of each kind and style of dress from the most formal to the least, with the Zapotec term for each.

Beginning with the field trip in 1974, I have lived with the Ramírez Fuentes family. The senior woman and an important mentor was Na Berta Pineda vda de Fuentes, until her death in May 1982. I stayed with her daughter, Na Rosinda Fuentes de Ramírez, and Rosinda's spouse, Ta Chu—Jesús Ramírez Escudero, and their daughter, Delia Ramírez Fuentes, exactly my age. The compound has changed shape physically over the years as have its human occupants: the senior generation, Berta and her siblings and their spouses, have become ancestors, Ta Chu has joined them, and two new generations have appeared. I have grown up alongside Delia, absorbing what it means to be an Isthmus Zapotec woman by participating in activities, mundane as well as celebratory, embodying both the craft and the aesthetic behind it. I have grown up as an ethnographer there as well—learning to shift between the embodied and the intellectual, the participatory and the reflective.

I share my life and my work with Juchitecos of all classes and vocations, giving talks at the Casa de la Cultura, writing prologues to books by local authors, publishing in Spanish in Mexico, providing copies of photographs and films, translating local poets from Isthmus Zapotec or Spanish into English, making photo CDs of the work of local artists for them to send to galleries, talking with young Juchiteco ethnographers and linguists and sharing materials. What I write, the story I interpret, comes from all this living and collaborating.