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Oaxaca: Crossroads of a Continent: Project Rationale
by George Scheper and Laraine Fletcher

I. Introduction

The National Endowment for the Humanities has awarded funding to The Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) to conduct a 2007 Summer Institute on the topic of "Oaxaca: Crossroads of a Continent." The project is co-directed by Laraine Fletcher (anthropology, Adelphi University), and George Scheper (humanities, Community College of Baltimore County, Essex), and the project manager is David A. Berry, Executive Director of CCHA. This four-week Institute, held on-site in locations in Oaxaca, Mexico from July 1 through August 1, 2007, is an in-depth study of the history and culture of the area, with a focus on the indigenous cultures of the Zapotec and Mixtec peoples, in pre-Columbian, colonial, and contemporary contexts. **Twenty-four faculty selected from community and four-year colleges and universities throughout the United States will have the opportunity to study Zapotec and Mixtec culture in the field with nine internationally known scholars and writers from a variety of humanities and social sciences disciplines, as outlined in the [Daily Schedule](#).**

Building on our previous successful NEH Institutes on the topics of Andean, Maya, Aztec and Puebloan cultures, this project is designed as part of an on-going effort to enhance current knowledge about the indigenous peoples of the Americas. "Oaxaca: Crossroads of a Continent" aims at highlighting an often overlooked region of the Americas where some of the most important transformations in human history have taken place. While they have been over-shadowed by the more familiar Inca, Maya and Aztec civilizations, it was the indigenous peoples of the Oaxaca region -- ancestors of today's Zapotec and Mixtec peoples -- who were responsible for an independent development of agriculture, for early urbanization and primary state formation, and for the production of some of the earliest monumental architecture and earliest manifestations of Mesoamerican writing and calendrical systems in the New World. Oaxaca thus joins the select company of the few places in the world that have seen the independent or pristine development of agriculture (Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China and the Andes being the others), and the even smaller group of culture areas that have seen the independent invention of script writing systems (the Sumerian, Egyptian and Chinese being the others). Moreover, the 8,000-year record of human and civilizational development in the Oaxaca region is unusually complete and continuously well documented, from the archaic period to modern times.

II. Land of the Cloud People

The Institute is intended to address the longstanding marginalization of what is in fact an important locus for understanding the development of civilization in the Americas. While presently it is one of the poorest states in Mexico, Oaxaca in the past was a center of Mesoamerican civilization and was, for instance, the site of successful innovations in agricultural techniques, and it continues to be a site for experiments in sustainable agriculture (a topic recently analyzed by Roberto González in *Zapotec Science: Farming and Food in the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca*, 2001). As Oaxaca scholar Joyce Marcus has put it (personal communication), "Oaxaca is a virtual laboratory for human designs for living." Far from being the peripheral area it may seem to be today, in the pre-Columbian and colonial worlds, Oaxaca was a cultural center. UNESCO has in fact recognized both the Oaxacan archaeological site of Monte Albán, and the Spanish colonial City of Oaxaca, the state capital, as world heritage sites.

Oaxaca is a mountainous state in southern Mexico with a remarkable linguistic and cultural diversity: of its two and one-half million people, about 900,000 speak one or more of fifteen different indigenous languages, with Zapotec second to Spanish in number of speakers. The Institute will focus on the history and culture of two indigenous groups in particular, the Zapotec and Mixtec, both in their own respective languages referring to themselves as "Cloud People," with reference to the fertilizing mists that have been the basis for Oaxacan corn agriculture, their staff of life. An attached [map](#) locates the state of Oaxaca within Mexico, and identifies the regions within Oaxaca associated with different indigenous cultures, particularly the Zapotec cultural area, which ranges south and east from the City of Oaxaca to the Pacific coast and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, and the Mixtec cultural area, which ranges to the north and west of the capital, including the mountainous region called the Mixteca Alta.

In the ancient Zapotec culture area in the Oaxaca Valley, participants will study the origins of agriculture and its attendant rituals, and the creation and development of ceremonial centers, cities and state-level politics, along with the invention of writing and calendrical systems in the first millennium BCE. Seminars and field study will be guided by archaeologist Marcus Winter, author of *Oaxaca: the Archeological Record* (2004). Seminars on Oaxacan shamanism will be offered by anthropologist Ben Feinberg, author of *The Devil's Book of Culture: Mushrooms, Caves, and History in the Sierra Mazateca*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.

In the Mixtec highland culture area, the Mixteca Alta, we will study the rise of powerful *cacicazgos* or chiefdoms in the eleventh century CE, whose histories and personages are readable today in a remarkable series of surviving pre-Columbian bark-paper codices. Participants will be guided in the reading of facsimiles of the codices, while visiting the actual sites and landscapes of these ancient Mixtec narratives as they exist today. Field study will be led jointly by John Pohl (art history, Princeton University), an authority on Mixtec writing and co-author of *In the Realm of 8 Deer/ the Archaeology of Mixtec Codices* (1994), and by John Monaghan (anthropology, University of Illinois at Chicago), author of *The Covenants with Earth and Rain/ Exchange, Sacrifice, and Revelation in Mixtec Sociality* (1995). Seminars will include Pohl's lessons in the reading of Mixtec codices and Monaghan's explications of contemporary Mixtec rituals of renewal, gifting and sacrifice in syncretistic forms that combine Christian and nativist traditions.

The era of Spanish colonialism had a different character in Oaxaca than in other parts of Mexico. The Spanish presence was concentrated in the City of Oaxaca and in the various Dominican missions, but in the countryside, the Spanish hacienda system was not imposed to the same degree as elsewhere in Mexico, allowing for greater continuity of indigenous traditions. Participants will read selections from Kevin Terraciano, *The Mixtecs of Colonial Oaxaca* (2003), Ronald Spores, *The Mixtecs in Ancient and Colonial Oaxaca*. (1984) and John Chance, *Race and Class in Colonial Oaxaca* (1978), and institute scholars Selma Holo, Marcus Winter, John Pohl and John Monaghan will offer a commentary on colonial Oaxaca, especially as reflected in some of the magnificent baroque churches that participants will visit, such as Santo Domingo, Yanhuitlán and Coixtlahuaca.

The City of Oaxaca itself, the Spanish colonial, and contemporary, capital of the Mexican State of Oaxaca, while not itself historically a locus of indigenous culture, is today a globalized, multicultural center of Oaxacan intellectual and artistic production, reflecting a variety of cultural communities: national, indigenous and expatriate. Selma Holo (Museum Studies, University of Southern California), author of *Oaxaca at the Crossroads* (2004), will discuss these contemporary cultural crosscurrents in the city at the beginning of the project, in order to provide an intellectual and cultural orientation to our primary Institute location.

Participants will study contemporary indigenous cultural continuities and institutions, with a focus on weaving, in the Zapotec town of Teotitlán del Valle with Lynn Stephen (anthropology, University of Oregon), author of *Zapotec Women: Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Globalized Oaxaca*. (2005). Jeffrey Cohen (anthropology, Ohio State University), author of *The Culture of Migration in Southern Mexico* (2004) and *Cooperation and*

Community/ Economy and Society in Oaxaca (1999), will focus on issues of community and cooperation in the Zapotec town of Santa Ana, and on the centripetal forces drawing Oaxacan émigrés into the world beyond, notably into what has been called "OaxaCalifornia." Howard Campbell (anthropology, University of Texas, El Paso), will conduct seminars in the Isthmian city of Juchitán, center of a major contemporary Zapotec cultural revival movement, which he has documented in *Zapotec Struggles* (1993), *Zapotec Renaissance* (1994) and *Mexican Memoir* (2001). Campbell will also convene a roundtable of contemporary Zapotec writers and intellectuals.

For detailed Institute activities, please see the summary [Daily Schedule](#) or the [Narrative Description](#) of the project.

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