

## A VISIT TO SAN MATEO DEL MAR<sup>1</sup>

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San Mateo del Mar is a small village between the Gulf of Tehuantepec and the Mexican Red sea. Together with its four blood sisters of Santa María, San Dionisio, San Francisco and Huazantlan, it forms part of all that remains of the Huave people.

From all available history the Huave were in possession of far more territory until they were defeated and partially absorbed by the Zapotec who now dominate this part of the Isthmus.

Legend has it that they are the descendants of a tribe that emigrated from Peru in ancient times. An old patriarch of a priest who had covered this territory for over half a century told me that he had actually seen the "box" on which they base their legend of descending from the ancient Peruvians. Thus far, I have found no trace of the "box" itself but here is its story.

It was some 16 by 12 by 6 inches in size, extremely well made of fired clay. Fit with a sliding cover of fired clay, it contained a trick, sliding catch that would release the cover only when the box was tilted sharply on one side and then immediately to the rear. Within this box were five engraved, glazed plates, each fitting its proper place.

The first plate showed an engraved maguey plant with two equal branches.

The second depicted a woman, seated in the center

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<sup>1</sup> Fathers Biasioli and Van Hoos visited the Huave village of San Mateo del Mar for the first time in March, 1952. Readers of *Tlalocan* will find other material connected with this Note in "The Holy Bells and Other Huave Legends" by Milton Warkentin and Juan Olivares (*Tlalocan* II:3, pp. 223-234).

of the plaque; she wore a high, angular crown. On her right and left were twin boys. Surrounding them were other people with smaller crowns.

The third plate revealed the twin boys, dressed as soldiers and fighting with spears.

The fourth engraving showed an army of soldiers on one side holding broken spears while another army on the opposite side held aloft unbroken spears. In the center sat one of the twins with the woman kneeling in supplication before him.

The final plate revealed the second twin lying dead, with the same woman mourning on her knees.

This "box" was the birthright of the Huave people and here is its explanation: According to the legends that are now told, the maguey plant (as far as I could learn, it was a maguey plant), with its two equal arms, represents an ancient Peruvian queen who gave birth to twin sons. The king being dead, it became necessary to elect a successor.

On the second plate the queen is seeking the advice of the chieftains and court counsellors as to which of the twins should have the right of succession.

As no one could solve the dilemma, it was to be resolved by recourse to arms. The third plate shows the twins fighting for a kingdom.

The fourth plaque shows the chieftains and warriors who supported the defeated twin, holding broken spears. The victors keep their arms intact. The queen kneels before the victor pleading for the life of the defeated twin.

On the fifth and final plate the queen grieves for her dead son, whose life was not spared by the victor.

As a result of this defeat, the chiefs and the people with the broken spears who had supported the dead twin, were forced into exile. They fled the coun-

try on foot, and much later, made their way to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec where they settled and ruled. Following their defeat by the warlike and more numerous Zapotecs many years later, their descendants have been reduced to the small holdings they now possess.

Whatever may be the true history of these people, it is certain that in the outlying districts they are absolutely distinct from the surrounding Zapotec Indians. The languages are absolutely different, bearing no resemblance to one another. The Huave language is spoken only in these few small villages. For the greater part, these people are small, cast in a semi-oriental mold, with slightly slanted eyes and brows and coarse, black hair. They are dark and swarthy in appearance, shy, timid and distrustful in the presence of strangers — a contrast to the Zapotecos. The women of the Huave group bear no resemblance to their regally poised Tehuana sisters.

No bleaker spot on the entire Isthmus could have been selected as a home than that of the Huave. However, it has probably been their salvation as an independent tribe throughout all these centuries, as the long, windswept, deep sandy stretches that the Huave occupy are hardly worthy of a second covetous glance.

The normal approach to this village is by oxcart or horseback from Boca del Río, a village a few miles outside of Salina Cruz. From here one fords the Tehuantepec river and for a few miles skirts the base of a few small peaks. There are a few additional miles of low scrub brush and chaparral, slashed here and there with narrow, ox-cart trails, before one bursts upon the flat sandy wasteland that is to continue until he reaches the land of the Huave.

Each year these villages celebrate the feasts of their patron saints. It was for the patronal feast of San Mateo del Mar that I found myself, at the edge of the Tehuantepec river one Monday morning ready to begin the trip into this section.

Within two miles we met the "presidente". He was able to read and write in Spanish and had been elected to head the group planning the festivities. His attire was a pair of faded blue jeans, a muchly patched shirt, sandals and a broad grin. The huge pack he carried on his back was placed in the ox-cart. It later proved to contain fireworks and an enormous jug of "aguardiente" to liven up the celebration.

As one jogs along, the terrain for miles is open to the strong north winds that roar with disturbing regularity and carry such a cloud of stinging sand that it is with difficulty that one forces the small raggy horses to head into it.

It is unbroken wasteland, save for a few ponds and tidal lakes, containing enough green grass to support the small flocks of grazing sheep and occasional horses. In most seasons egrets and herons poke their heads and long necks from the water holes. Ducks flock by the thousands and the proximity to the sea accounts for the squadrons of formation flying pelicans. Pigs root in all the shallow lakes and ponds, their snouts churning and digging narrow channels as they grub for snails and small shell fish. Each animal has a triangular, three-piece, wooden shield fitted around its neck. Half wild, they present a curious and comic effect as they go scurrying out of the way. These shields are to prevent them from entering the small cultivated plots that one encounters further on. Wood being too scarce to build solid fences of posts, they have solved the problem by placing the posts in

an upright position a couple of feet apart but still close enough to prevent the pig from entering with the stock around its neck.

After a few hours in the saddle, as one approaches closer to the town, a few Sahara-like oases appear on the scene. Then one sees a few isolated coconut palms that tower over the sandy wastes. At long last, over the distant dunes, while the sun beats down in a steady glare, one sights, alongside of a larger group of palm trees the upper part of the ancient church and soon is entering the town proper. San Mateo del Mar has a few thousand souls and its streets, all named and numbered, are merely wide alleys of coarse, deep sand, on which frolic countless pigs, many dogs and innumerable half-clad children — in most instances, to call them half-clad, would be to double the amount of clothes they wear. The houses, of woven straw and reeds, are windowless and dark. The church is a long cave-like structure. Many years ago it had been a parish in its own right and the present building dates back for hundreds of years. Fairly large for this section, it is constructed of big stones, brick and mortar. The stones must have been carted for many miles, probably from the base of the mountains we skirted this morning on the way in, as there is nothing in sight here save a seemingly endless expanse of sand. Into this aged and crippled structure a front and side door open, while high above the sanctuary is a small closed window. That is all the air and light that are permitted entrance. It is more like a lofty catacomb than a church; the plaster has long since fallen although the structure is still solid and sound. Niches line the walls in one continuous unbroken expanse. Crosses of all sizes, shapes, and descriptions line the walls. For the most part they are bare wooden crosses about seven

feet high and proportionally wide. There must be some seventy of them and some reason for their existence. All possible bare space in the niches is occupied with brilliantly and vividly painted and often grotesquely carved statues, pictures, santitos, etc., each with its candles or vigil lights burning and smoking before it.

For the weddings, the men wore whatever seems to have been handy. Wherever possible, however, they had on a brilliantly colored shirt. As is customary the shirt tails are knotted together and hang in front, never being tucked into the pants.

The women wore the modified Tehuana church costume. It doesn't quite fit the Huave women. They are too small and child-like. They do not have the poise nor the stature to set it off to advantage. That these people are poor is quite evident; they have none of the gold pendants and earrings that are so common to the Tehuanas. This church costume is a bit different from the regular "dress" uniform. Where the Tehuanas would have a skirt of heavily and colorfully embroidered material, these women merely have a simple skirt of colored material, usually red, or of white, banded with a red or reddish purple. The skirts do not, as a general rule, have the false petticoat effect for the last six or seven inches as do those of the Tehuanas. All the brides wore a strange, white, stiffly starched surplice-like bodice. This is edged or banded with a narrow tape of red, green, or blue. In one piece it comes up and fits over the head, forming a cap, whose pleated frills stand out and frame the face. Hanging directly down in front, from just under the neck, is what seems to be an empty sleeve of the same material. Its counterpart or mate hangs down the back. It looks as though grandma got the pattern

of her nightcap and nightgown mixed up, just like the old lady was on a "bender" and got it on sidewise. As yet I don't know the reason for this design but may, some day, find out. Probably it has some very simple explanation—like the original designing having had four hands. When I first saw it, I thought of the old-fashioned curtain stretchers that were in vogue when we were kids, when Mom would starch the lace parlor curtains and stretch them on this frame to dry, I couldn't help thinking that it looked as though these gals were thrown through the middle of one of these curtains and it just stuck that way.

I asked for a knife to sharpen the pencil I used to write these notes with. No one in the crowd had one. This was rather strange and I determined to find out why. They had a good reason. Knowing that there would be many outsiders for this celebration and realizing that the native firewater would be flowing rather freely, they had collected knives and other weapons until after the week's celebration.

The crosses that filled the church had been steadily deserting it. They were being erected on all lanes and paths that led into the village and were to serve as welcoming signs for the pilgrims who arrived for the culminating day of the festival — February 2.

Each cross led in a procession. It was preceded by a flute and two drums and followed by a small crowd that chanted a weird tune. First the men start with a low chant and then the women tie in with a high falsetto that breaks, ebbs, and dies. When you hear a few firecrackers and the tolling of the bells, you know that another cross is on its way. It is impossible to describe fully this wailing chant. It would have to be recorded. It is like a combination Jew's harp and ocarina; like the eerie whistle of the wind

vibrating through tautly strung wires. It swells, changes key and falls away to a moan, a whimper, a whisper. It is a weird but not unpleasant sound. As there are short breaks between each verse or chant, one can hear the "echo" sounding far away. It is merely the other processions that left before, a sort of harmonic coming back from all directions. The drums themselves do not have a regular beat. Some may be rhythmic but others falter. To match to them, one would need a lame leg.

The band, which plays for all services in the church is something out of this world — trumpet, saxophone, clarinet, and trombone — everything but the drums. It makes no difference what service you are having, as they seem to play the same cacophony for everything. The description is "like a high school band tuning up." If you think that it is just some modern innovation, you are unfortunately very mistaken. While I sincerely doubt that any of them can read a note of music, yet there is a piece of handwritten sheet music that seems to serve for all. It is yellow with age, much dog-eared and dirty. Written in a flourishing Spanish script it states *Trombone: arrangement for the Eighth Mass*. What happened was that years ago the early monks, capitalizing on the native attraction to loud, blaring noise, introduced and taught the native these instruments to get them together. With the passage of years they insinuated themselves into the church proper.

From a purely physical aspect, I could not help thinking how similar this scene was to one I had seen outside of Shanghai years ago. Curiosity and a sense of adventure had drawn me into the midst of a motley and nondescript crowd of Chinese. We had crossed a sandy courtyard and approached a rather large build-



ing. The green-tiled roof was pleasingly yet ornately decorated with crawling dragons and upturned eaves so peculiar to the orient. At the entrance vendors hawked small pin cushions, porcupines, clusters of joss sticks, tapers and what-not. The people bowed profound obeisances to the two large dragon-like lions guarding the entrance and I stumbled in, with the press of the crowd. A long, low Chinese temple, dark and murky, with Buddhas peering at one from the walls through the clouds of incense smoke and wavering in the dim light of smoking tapers. Crowds passed through with their tapers and joss sticks bowing to their statues and a band of sorts shrilled in the courtyard, punctuated by the tiny clang of the cymbals.

Like a dream, here on these sandy stretches was a scene I had had seen years before on the other side of the world, being repeated. The building was long, low and dark. The God here was different, and the statues, while grotesque, were of actual saints. The vendors outside sold candles instead of joss sticks. But the same murky atmosphere and clouds of incense smoke prevailed. The quasi-Oriental cast of the people, passing through with their tapers and bowing to the statues, the band — all lent similarity to the comparison. Then, as now, I wondered exactly what went on in the minds of these people. What did they actually believe? One group spoke Chinese and the other Huave, but both were thus far unintelligible.

This church was built back in "Colonial times", when Cortés was the Marqués del Valle, ruler of the southern section of New Spain. The bells, while not as old as the church, well tuned and melodious, are the best I have heard outside of Mexico City. They are housed in a special palm thatched shed together with the drums. By different combinations or methods

of ringing them, individuals can be called or events announced. Supposedly they rate a constant day and night guard. Certainly they had this guard, men who slept in the bell house for the entire time we were there. The main bell, far more recent than the church, bears the date 1774. According to legend, all these bells came from heaven. They are said to disappear and return regularly. No one knows how, where or why. From the size of them, it would indeed be a miracle and while I subscribe to miracles, I pass this one up.

The houses are much the same. Each occupies a square section of the sandy wasteland, its privacy guaranteed by a yard surrounded by a high closely matted, cane fence, that usually corrals a few chickens, an emaciated dog or two and a few rooting pigs. From this yard the entrance to the house is merely an open door frame that leads to an enclosed shed-like room which in turn opens into the house proper. The latter is a large rectangular room built of the same closely woven carrizal or cane, topped by a thatched roof supported on several upright posts. There are no other doors or windows and the floor is the ubiquitous, deep, coarse sand.

The air itself is fresh due to the porous construction of the walls and roof but the available natural light is negligible. Coming, as one does, from the bright sunlight at first he notices very little until his eyes become accustomed to the gloom. In this particular home, as I entered, I could perceive in one corner a small shrine with a holy picture and a candle burning before it. That was the prevailing light. When another taper was brought I could discern a couple of bare beds consisting of a platform supported on four small posts. There was a raised block of stone

servicing as a table, a metate, a couple of woven baskets, a few clay pots and a small fishing net. Undoubtedly there must have been other articles but they were not at home that day. Cooking, save during the rainy season is done on an open fire in the yard; and during the cold, damp rainy season a coarsely woven blanket provides the only cover.

In the town we found the sand-filled acre or so in front of the church occupied by all sorts of little stands selling anything from meals to beer. There are several varieties of local bingo, pitch or shell games, beer and cold drink stands; candle sellers, fruit sellers. These shops are merely a rough table and two or four upright posts supporting a thatched roof, easily erected and torn down. Many of these shop-keepers spend their lives travelling from one fiesta to the other and the local talent seems to resent the outsiders.

A large truck had just arrived with supplies for the celebration. I am not sure how they came in but they must found a shallow place to ford the river, probably cutting down the steep banks to do it. All other transportation is by horse and ox-cart, but they say that every year one truck tries to make it.

While the church was always crowded with the various pilgrims coming and going, bringing candles and flowers, by far the greater part of the people were outside, watching the show.

Most of the crosses were gone by then and the music and processions had thinned out for a time. It began to pick up again as they carried out statues and met groups of pilgrims at the door. A couple of real Indian bands arrived also. The music was a sort of bamboo fife, shrilling and piping away, accompanied by a hand-slapped drum, the same half a dozen notes played over and over. In an open space formed

by the gaping crowd these two instruments provided the music for the dance. The performers, all men, held a sort of small spear. Clearly it is only a symbol, truncated about a foot in length. The dancers stepped flat-footed and side ways for a few steps and ever so often turned in a circle. The only humor was added by three drunks who joined the dancers and attempted to follow the steps of the dance. The dancers had no special costume save for a sash, a colored shoulder cloth, and a broad colored head-band. In front of the church another group arrived, carrying a sort of square folded feather umbrella. Each man had one. They was also a group of dancers. They, too, had no distinctive costumes, just colored scarves, the peculiar headdress, old trousers and shirts with the tails hanging out. The feathered umbrellas are hats with square mirrors attached to the front. They were likewise adorned without any definite pattern. They were covered with tinsel and bits of mirrors and on their heads, dangling over the forehead, was a fringe of silver coins. In one hand they grasped a few long colored feathers and in the other they held a gourd or rattle. The hopped twice on one foot, more or less in unison, and without shaking the rattle then they stepped three times with the other foot while shaking the rattle. They then fell to one knee, bowed and shook the rattles. This went on for some time. Called "Los Malinches", this dance is said to be an invocation of the Deity.

I had heard of a phenomenon peculiar to this section of the coast. San Mateo del Mar is at least a half a mile from the coast and when the waves roll in, one normally hears nothing at this distance. Yet at times the roar and rush of the waves can be heard for many miles—a hollow, booming roar.

It was a clear, calm, cloudless night, hot and fairly close, with only a breath of air from the south. A typical night here. You could hear the waves roaring as though you were right on shore. I can readily believe that at times they must sound with the roar of a dozen express trains.

Later I commented on the roar of the waves at San Mateo del Mar and was told the following story.

Not too many years ago an engineer, having found one of the stone idols of the Huave, appropriated it and sent it to the Museum in Mexico City. This god Mange (Mahnggee) was their god of rainfall and very important to them. Since this removal many of them often complain of their sad lot and the lack of rain. His residence was in one of a series of caves near the sea and when he spoke loudly, it heralded the approach of rain. Rain to them is a very important factor, not so much for their relatively negligible crops but because only when it rains do the shrimp come from the ocean and pass into the shallow bays where the Huave fish. Few, if any of them, can swim, yet their main livelihood is to catch these shrimp with hand-drawn nets along the shore or from small dug-outs in the shallow back bays. These shrimp are very small and are either dried for market or are placed in cane hampers and packed on the men's backs to Salina Cruz and market.

The curious story of how Mange worked was told to me. It was a mere coincidence that he should have been placed in a cave near the coast, but it is only too true that his shout or bellow often announced the approach of rain. His cry was merely a louder or amplified version of the noise I had heard. For the very large waves to roll in and create this hollow boom or cry of Mange, a south wind was necessary to echo in

the vaults or caves near the shore. Because this section of the country runs almost due east and west and has a mountain range in the center, it never rains here when the wind comes (as it predominantly does) from the north. These mountains act as a barrier to the clouds and the rainfall is far more intense in the tropical northern section of the Isthmus. When, however, our rainy season approaches, it means that the wind has shifted and now comes briefly from the south. The waves and clouds roll in, wind and waves pound the shore and reverberate from the caves, Mange roars and the same central belt of mountains, preventing the passage of the clouds, causes a fall of heavy rain in the southern section. Many of the natives gave credence and sacrifice to the rain-calling ability of Mange.

Such is my story of a brief visit to the Huave people of San Mateo del Mar.