Life in the Mixteca of Mexico: A Visit to the Village of San Isidro Tilantongo
2014 UVM Food Systems Semester Abroad Class

Introduction.

The Mixteca is the region of Mexico that is home to the Mixtec people. Most of this region is in the western half of the Mexican State of Oaxaca, which is located in the southwest corner of the country. Mixtec kingdoms ruled this area from the 10th through the 16th centuries, and at the time the Spanish arrived there were an estimated half a million Mixtecs. The Mixtec culture was sophisticated, creating architectural monuments, a calendar, sustainable farming systems, and codices of glyphic writing documenting important events.

The Alta or Highland is one of three regions in the Mixteca; it contains approximately 38 municipios (or counties) in the mountains west of the Oaxaca valley. This part of the Mixteca was home to the capitals of the most powerful Mixtec kingdoms, one of which was the city-state of Tilantongo. Archaeologists suggest this was the center of the Mixtec civilization in the last centuries before the Spanish conquest.

San Antonio Tilantongo is one municipio in the Mixteca Alta. Located on the northern border of Oaxaca next to the state of Puebla it has a population of about 4,000 people and contains 18 different administrative units, including the congregation of San Isidro, which is a small pueblo (town) of about 70 people. The people here maintain many of the best traditions of campesinos, or peasant farmers. They produce most of their own food, they have strong sense of community and family ties, and they respect and celebrate the environment.

San Isidro Tilantongo at a Glance.

Life in San Isidro Tilantongo is peaceful and content, yet it requires hard work and dedication. The Mixteca is a beautiful part of Mexico with wide open valleys in between mountain ranges. The small communities spread across this landscape are close-knit and self-sufficient in many ways.

The citizens of San Isidro are dedicated to practicing a sustainable lifestyle through stewardship of natural resources and use of low-impact traditional farming methods. They are very open to sharing their knowledge about these methods in order to shed light on a way of life that preserves resources for the future.
A principal characteristic of San Isidro Tilantongo is that it produces the majority of the food needed to make the meals of its citizens. Only surpluses of crops are sold to outside communities. In other words, the first goal of the people who live here is to feed themselves; selling food for profit is not strived for, but some supplemental income is helpful.

The people are proud of the role of corn in their diet and have adopted a sustainable agricultural system to cultivate it. This is hard work and it requires much knowledge and skill, from planting to harvesting. Corn is an extremely important ingredient in the Mexican cuisine, as it is in San Isidro de Tolantongo, where tortillas are the mainstay of the diet. When asked about tortillas, one woman from the community said, “If we don’t make tortillas, we don’t eat.” The tortilla-making process is labor-intensive and the women are proud of it.

Wheat is another important crop for San Isidro Tilantongo. It is used make a small, hard bread that is typically eaten with coffee, hot chocolate or atole (a porridge-like beverage comprised of grain, water, sugar and spices). The wheat used for these foods is grown, harvested, threshed and cleaned using traditional methods and simple tools.

Most of the agricultural tools used by campesino communities were developed hundreds of years ago. They include simple planting sticks, wooden plowing implements and baskets with holes for cleaning grains. Horses are used to plow the fields, to transport items, and to thresh the wheat. The use of simple but effective technology is a sustainable element that the community is proud of. They chuckle when tractors are mentioned, saying tractors are unnecessary for the work that they do. They rely on using methods that are low cost, readily available, and effective.

Though life in San Isidro Tilantongo demands hard work, it is very rewarding. For example, local crops are made into delicious and healthy meals. People are engaged in meaningful work and they conduct it at their own pace. The citizens here are critical of the food system in Oaxaca de Juárez and other cities because of the abundance of processed foods and the effect they have on people’s diet.
The people of San Isidro Tilantongo believe that simplicity is the foundation of living a sustainable and wholesome life, and this is expressed in the fresh foods they eat, the work they do and the tools they use. People here have a strong sense of place and they are proud of their community. They appreciate what they have and the lifestyle they have chosen.

The Importance of Community.

The foundation of indigenous communities in Oaxaca is comprised of four major ‘pillars’: fiesta, tequio, assemblea, and the significance of land versus territory.

Fiesta is the practice of organizing parties to celebrate religious events, patron saints, or major community occasions. These are investments in the community because the fiestas function using the principle of guelaguetza, or reciprocity. Under this system, individuals are expected to contribute to the fiesta in any way that is economically feasible, with the knowledge that they will eventually be paid back by the investment of others in future fiestas.

Tequio describes unpaid community work to achieve a communally-beneficial goal, such as improving infrastructure like roads or irrigation systems. Tequio is also a way to utilize government aid that may come to small pueblos in the form of construction materials.

Assemblea describes the governance system of indigenous pueblos. Any resident of the pueblo may be elected for a ‘cargo’ which is a community leadership position. Once elected the person is then dedicated to that position, without pay, for one year. The cargo positions are arranged in a hierarchy of increasing responsibility. Individuals usually start off with a less intensive cargo and then work their way up to the higher positions, such as of director of communal land, treasurer, or municipal president. All community decisions are made based on consensus, which is reached during the Assemblea meetings, where everyone gathers to votes on issues affecting the municipio. Local leaders with cargo represent the congregation at municipio-wide assemblea.

Land and territory customs demonstrate the important difference between those two words. Land connotes the spiritual connections that exist between humans and the earth, exemplified by the profound respect that community members have for the soil that produces their crops. Territory has a more geographic meaning as it describes the physical boundaries that divide plots of farmland and different municipalities.

These four pillars contribute to the rich social capital of San Isidro Tilantongo. Social capital can be defined as the mutual benefit received from community cooperation. Social capital is not something that many modern societies explicitly value, but in San Isidro Tilantongo it is at the core of everyday life.

In this pueblo, as well as many other rural indigenous communities, wealth is a concept that is not defined by money, but rather by the vehicles for survival such as land, crops, and a strong social fabric. The social fabric is analogous to the concept of the milpa, which is the intercropping of corn, beans and squash.
Much like the milpa, the people living in the pueblos are not complete without the entire community. Each resident, similar to each plant, only can serve so many functions and roles, and the beauty lies in how the people, or plants, interact to form a complete and mutually beneficial system that is greater than the sum of its parts. The milpa characteristic of mutualism is also displayed by the reciprocity that permeates the community, as neighbors and families come together to cultivate their land, prepare food, and make decisions for the greater good of everyone. This meshing of efforts and shared values helps maintain the vitality of the land and the community in a sustainable, self-sufficient manner, just as the maize, beans, and squash do in the context of the milpa.

**Cajete: corn of the Mixteca.**

In the Mixteca Alta region of Oaxaca there is a type of corn called ‘Cajete’ that is over approximately 6,000 years old yet it is still being grown today. The reason for Cajete’s longevity has to do with its ability to continue to grow even when conditions are harsh, which is often the case in this region. The soils of the area are naturally low in fertility, and much of the land has been severely deforested, leading to erosion and loss of topsoil. In addition, the climate of the Mixteca Alta is characterized by long periods without rain. The combination of poor soils and lack of water make it hard to grow crops. Though the odds have been stacked against it, Cajete has been a reliable crop in the Mixteca Alta region for many centuries.

The name Cajete comes from the name of the small indentations made in the dry fields prior to planting the corn seed. These are called cajetes, and they serve to catch rainwater and hold it around the crop so it can sink into the soil rather than run off. Although the local people use Cajete as the name of the corn that is well adapted to their region, this ‘variety’ has actually been identified by researchers as three different varieties of corn with the names Chalqueño, Conico, or Mixteco.
When planting, ‘Cajete’ corn seeds are placed in each indentation using a traditional tool called a coa, or a planting stick. It is used to dig down so seeds can be placed where there is soil moisture that remains from the previous year’s rainy season. This is a distinct advantage of planting corn in the cajetes: the varieties of corn that have been adapted to conditions of the Mixtec Alta have the ability to germinate using only soil moisture, they do not require rainfall. Once germinated, they can survive for months without water.

The seeds of ‘Cajete’ corn in the Mixteca Alta, along with some beans and squash, are typically planted in early March, a couple of months before the end of the dry season. The corn is then harvested nine months later in November. This is a much longer growing season than most hybrid corn varieties or even criollo (wild) types of corn. That could be viewed as a disadvantage in terms of land use, but the corn of the Mixteca Alta’s ability to survive under duress justifies the extra time it takes in the field.

The corn that is planted in a field cajetes is an example of botanical brilliance. Not only is it capable of germinating and surviving only using residual soil moisture, but it yields as well or better than other types of corn under the conditions of the Mixteca Alta. Although modern corn production is dominated by genetically modified varieties planted in monocultures, that system is not suited to the Mixtec Alta. It makes more sense for people there to sow corn that is adapted to their local environment and traditional farming practices. The corn called Cajete is much like the people who live in the Mixteca Alta region: resilient.

La Milpa: cultivating an ecological diet.

The milpa is a productive cultivation system that is thousands of years old in which corn (maize), beans (frijoles), and squash (calabaza) are grown close together in the same field (a practice known as intercropping). This method of production, in contrast to monoculture, creates biological diversity, enhances soil fertility, and provides insect and weed control without the use of pesticides or significant amounts of external fertility inputs.
The milpa is a production system that minimizes competition between the crops because they each utilize different vertical and horizontal space in the field. In addition, each crop performs a role that benefits the others. The corn, which is very demanding of soil fertility, provides support for the beans as they grow upward, winding around the corn stalks. This enables the beans to capture more sunlight, enhancing photosynthesis and growth. The beans, because they are legumes, fix atmospheric nitrogen, enhancing the soil’s fertility, which contributes to the growth of the corn. Squash plants fill the space between the corn and bean plants, covering the ground with large leaves, which helps control weeds. Squash flowers as well as the fruits are used in the campesino diet.

Although the basis of the milpa is three staple crops, the ecological diversity of the system allows for the growth of other edible plants, such as the nutritious greens called quiletes that grow along the perimeter of the milpa field. These greens, combined with the maize, beans, and squash, help provide a diverse diet from a single field.

**Infrastructure in San Isidro de Tilantongo.**

Access to fresh water is a critical issue in rural Mexico, as it is in agricultural communities around the world. There are two fresh water streams that run along either side of San Isidro de Tilantongo but until recently buckets had to be used to get that water to the houses in the village. To improve their quality of life, the community decided to install a water distribution system, with the help of donations from a foundation that promotes rural development. Water from the stream above the village is now moved into a large cistern using a low-cost water pump. Irrigation pipes come down the mountain using gravity to deliver water to individual homes. The pipes are made of 2-inch durable plastic laid in trenches that were dug by a hired backhoe, then the pipes were covered by hand using shovels.

Families in the pueblo now have running water for sinks in their homes. However, water is not used for toilets. All the toilets are outhouses, and the wastes are composted before use in an ecologically friendly manner, such as fertilizing fruit trees. Water is never used for washing machines, either. Clothes are washed by hand.

Although this is a remote village, it has electric power. Power lines run through the countryside to most small villages in Mexico. However, electricity is used frugally here, not the way it is used in large cities or in ‘first world’ countries. Power is used only for lights and small appliances such as blenders, various cooking appliances and fans.

*Tortillas being prepared in the kitchen on a traditional wood-heated comal, or griddle. The kitchens, and homes, of San Isidro de Tilantongo are very simple but comfortable, clean and functional.*
Most cooking is done over a wood fire, though some homes also have a gas stove. Houses and buildings are all hand made by the men of the pueblo. They use sturdy, low-maintenance materials such as cement for floors, cement block or traditional mud walls, and palm or sheet metal roofs.

The people in the pueblo utilize a limited amount of modern infrastructure technology to provide some basic comforts, but they are entirely happy without the vast array of technology and materialistic goods that characterize ‘first world’ countries.

**Choosing the campesino way of life.**

San Isidro Tilantongo is home to the couple Augustine and Berta, and their 5 children. Based on the home they have built, their strong community ties, and the connection they have with their land, it seems as though they’ve spent their entire lives there. Though this is the case for many campesinos, Augustine and Berta are different. Berta moved to this secluded pueblo from the city, where she was raising her first two daughters. Augustine was born in this pueblo but left for several years to pursue employment elsewhere.

Berta’s life in the city was very different – she had access to a washing machine, car, grocery stores and places to buy tortillas. She led an urban lifestyle. Yet, she chose to trade all of that for life in the campo. Upon first entering the town, one wouldn’t blame her. The peace, quiet, and tranquility in San Isidro Tilantongo is a welcome change of pace from hectic city life. Much of the food is harvested locally and is very healthy, the air is clean and refreshing, and the water is safe to drink. Life in the city, on the other hand, came with many stresses as well as conveniences. Berta worked a busy job while making sure her daughters were where they needed to be and well cared for. In San Isidro Tilantongo she doesn’t have such a pressing schedule, but her work in the home has increased. She now washes all the family’s clothes by hand, wakes up early to prepare tortillas, and has to live frugally to make ends meet. Berta also engages in much of the leadership in the community by working with local wheat producers and attending town meetings with the asemblea.

Augustine was born in San Isidro Tilantongo, one of 9 children. He was the only one to return to the pueblo after working as a carpenter in several cities. The work he now does, growing and processing crops, caring for animals and maintaining his home is laborious, especially since it is done without modern day technology. However, Augustin is incredibly satisfied with his way of life. He is so thankful for the time he gets to spend with his family, that his children can play freely and safely while he is working, and he feels a deep connection to nature that he and his family have all around them. This concept goes against the machismo stereotype that plagues Mexico. Augustine is very involved with his children and helps out in the home with cooking and parenting, whereas men in other parts of the country may have little involvement in the rearing of their children. The conventional roles for men and women are challenged and both parents do what they can to preserve their way of life.

Augustine and Berta are part of an extended family. One of the benefits of living in a small pueblo is the daily access to other family members. Augustine’s mother helps with household chores such as cooking and caring for the children, which allows for Berta and Augustine to work more and pursue causes important to them.
Both Augustine and Berta are keenly aware of the choice they have made, the tradeoffs that resulted and the campesino traditions they are maintaining. They are proud to call San Isidro Tolantongo home.

**CEDICAM and San Isidro Tilantongo.**

The Mixteca region is home to an organization called CEDICAM which stands for Center for Integral Small Farmer Development in the Mixteca. CEDICAM is a non-governmental organization working to provide information on reforestation, sustainable agriculture and economic development to 1,100 families in 22 pueblos. One of the founders of this organization is Augustine’s older brother.

CEDICAM’s has three main goals which are: to improve soil conservation, increase food self-sufficiency and support small-scale community economic development.

Soil conservation is a critical environmental issue in the Mixteca which has been classified as one of the principal areas of desertification in the world. The first project put into place by CEDICAM was reforestation using a system of trenches that run levelly across the hillsides. This slows erosion during the rainy season and allows the water to flow down to the water table. Trees planted in the trenches add organic matter to the soil and cover to the land. From this project, the organization continued to grow.

CEDICAM is now engaged in promoting food production in communities to increase self-sufficiency. This is done using campesino-to-campesino education about traditional farming practices such as the milpa and the simple tools needed to cultivate it. Micro-loans are also made to women to help them start small business that serve their communities and generate some income for their families.

The traditions being maintained by the community of San Isidro Tilantongo exhibit the guiding principles of CEDICAM’s projects. This community is proud of their soil conservation, of their biologically diverse food production using milpa, and of their self-reliance. San Isidro Tilantongo is a great example for people that work with CEDICAM as they seek to acquire new knowledge to improve the sustainability of their own communities.
References.


Map of the Mixteca taken from: Summer Institute of Linguistics in Mexico. http://www-01.sil.org/mexico/mixteca/00i-mixteca.htm


*By Vern Grubinger, Kensey Hanson, Hannah Harrington, Margaret Liljedahl, Carter Lincoln, Caitlin Safford, Sarah Shaw, Lauren Truncellito. 3-29-14*