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Zapotec (Zapotecan)
Mitla

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SIX BELIEFS OF
ZAPOTECOS OF MITLA, OAXACA

Submitted by:
Hilda M. Halloran
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ORIENTATION

The Zapotecos of Mitla, Oaxaca number about 5000. From the ancient ruins situated there, one can see that theirs has been a highly cultured race, rich in their own beliefs and customs. Today, they still reflect the heritage that is theirs and are a proud progressive people.

This paper is written to give some of the prevailing beliefs and to illustrate with actual happenings.

The material has been obtained from a number of sources: text from Sra. Asunción Goopar de Lopez, casual conversation while visiting, or while doing some medical work.

I EVIL EYE

When a person looks covetously upon a baby or small child, he casts an evil eye upon the baby. Soon after, the baby begins to vomit and has diarrhea. In order that the evil spirit might be taken out, a whole egg is obtained and rubbed over the face, entire head, hands and body. The baby will then get well.

II Ear Ringing

These people say that there is a significance to the ringing in the ear. When it seems as if a little bug is in there, crying, then someone is talking and saying bad things about them.

III Air

Many maladies are attributed to air "hitting" a person.

One man had a severe case of swelling on one side of his face. He said that he had gone outside one evening and the night air had hit him. The painful swelling was the result.

Twitching of the eye; rheumatic pains in the muscles of the back, legs, or arms; gas pains, or growling of the stomach; are all due to being hit by the air.

IV Fear and Anger

Fear and anger are looked upon as, almost, diseases. One young boy was giving us the cause of the large deep scab on his leg. While out walking in the field, he became afraid; later this large sore appeared. "Is there some medicine for fear?" was his inquiry.

A young woman, to whom was lent some photographs, became very angry at her young son when he tore one to pieces. The next day, a large cold sore appeared on her lip. To her, this was the result of her wrath.

Sudden fright will often cause the soul to leave the body. Soon after, the body will die because the soul has never come back. Perhaps the dying will last

over a period of several years.

A girl, in her late teens, lay on her bed wasting away for months unable to care for herself in any way. At the last she became blind, went into a coma, and died. How could she get well? Sometime before, she had seen a snake and was so affrighted that her soul departed from her body. How could a body remain healthy and alive without its soul?

While visiting friends, whose front door opened on one of the main streets of town, the following incident was seen. The little girl pulled open the door and stuck out her head. Startled, she withdrew it just intime, for a large bull going by stuck in his head. Immediately, the grandmother, a small cousin, and the little girl took mouth fulls of water and spewed them on the door step and called her frightened spirit back. Water has some power to recall these departing spirits.

V Catarrah

If a person has a continual runny nose, not caused by a cold, it is because the soft spot in the head has been, and is diseased. When the spot is healed, the other will clear up.

VI Ever Present, Though unseen, Spirits

These jolly people are constantly aware of unseen spirits, and many times their conduct is regulated so as not to antagonize them for fear of dire results.

On October 31st and November 1, the spirits of the dead little ones and older ones, respectively, return, coming one noon and leaving the next. They are welcomed and sent back with fireworks. An assortment of food and things are put out that these souls might partake. One little girl said that they must do it on the spirits would pull their legs and molest them, for such had happened to her. If something happens to the arrangement of food, such as, one piece of bread falling over, the members of the household attribute it to the ire of one of the spirits. Their actual presence is known as a fact because of occurrences. One man had two glasses of wine in a room and the next a.m., all of it was gone. Pouring two more

he sat and watched to see what would happen. Slowly, the wine went down in the glass. Getting up, he inspected them for cracks but none could be found. Thus, he knows that the spirits were in the room drinking the wine; his belief was verified.

Kicking a human skull or molesting any part of a human skeleton will bring the molestations of the spirit on the person. A young lad seeing a skull lying in the field, playfully kicked it and went on his way. That night, as he lay in bed, his legs were pulled and in the morning, he had turned white. He was told by his aunt and uncle that he should go back and put the skull in its former place. This done, he became his natural color.

Two girls were taking lunch out to their father who was working in his cornfield. They saw a human skull with teeth in it and one girl selected and removed a tooth. When she returned home, she told her mother who quickly said that she must return it to the very same location and put it in the skull. As the girl neared the place, she became afraid and threw the tooth and ran home. That night, the spirit started pulling her and, though she resisted, it continued pulling until it pulled her out to the cemetery.