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MARRIAGE CUSTOMS  
AMONG  
THE ZAPOTECOS OF MITLA, OAXACA

Submitted by:  
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## ORIENTATION

Nestling down at the south east end of the thirty-mile Oaxaca valley lies Mitla, town of souls. Except for the more verdant spots here and there, the entire countryside presents a barren, yet strikingly beautiful, picture.

Despite the fact that Mitla is a tourist town because of the renowned ruins, the 5000 <sup>inhabitants</sup> ~~people~~ still practise their native customs. Little by little, however, modern styles and customs are entering but not as fast as one would expect. These friendly Zapoteco's are a proud people: proud of their language, customs, and town.

Most of the following information was received in text form from Sra. Asunción Goobar de Lopez. Some was obtained from Sr. Pedro Santiago who is one of the official go-betweens of the town.

Elsie Clews Parsons has written a book "Mitla, Town of Souls" in which she described the customs as they existed about fifteen years ago. Changes have taken place but they have not been noted as this would involve too many fine points which I did not deem necessary.

## Marriage Customs Among The Zapotecos of Mitla, Oaxaca

### 1. The Engagement, or Asking for the Bride:

A young man has picked the girl <sup>1</sup> of his choice (it is usually mutual) and desires to marry her. He asks a friend or the official go-between to go to her father's house and present his cause.

Upon arrival at the house and after going through the formal greeting, the go-between says, "I have come on an errand. A certain person sent me to ask you to give your daughter in marriage to his son."

"Let me think. Come and ask again in fifteen days. Meanwhile I will talk to my daughter and see what she says," replies the father.

With this said, the go-between gives the man two boxes of cigars or cigarettes, and leaves.

The father of the girl asks her if she desires to get married saying that a man had just come to ask for her. "Who knows," answers the girl, "you know if you will give me." If the girl does not want to marry the man, she says nothing.

"When the go-between comes, I will tell him that you want to get married," concludes the father.

Fifteen days go by and the go-between returns. "I have come to ask about the errand on which I came fifteen days ago." <sup>2</sup>

The father tells him that his daughter will marry the young man but on the condition that they will be married soon.

1. Girls are from the ages of fifteen and upward.

2. The go-between usually goes to the house about four times before he is accepted. It is not customary to accept the first time.

put  
in text

"I will go with your request to your consuegro<sup>1</sup>. Tomorrow, I will come again." With this he leaves, and carries the message to the father of the young man.

"Thus she will marry," says the father in agreement to the request. "Go and tell the father of the young woman".

Again the go-between goes to the house of the bride-to-be. "I come with the answer. Thus says your consuegro: thus they shall marry." A gift of four packs of cigarettes is given to the father with these words "Take a little cigarette and smoke it with your god-parents."

Another message is given to the go-between by the father of the girl, "Bring the young man in fifteen days and I will counsel him."

"Have no fear, in fifteen days, we will come and bring the young man with us," reassures the go-between.

When fifteen days are completed, the parents of the groom, god-parents, the go-between, and the young man go to the house of the girl. The young man is then counselled by the relatives of the bride. Following this, the young man kneels in front of the altar and the father of the girl asks him, "Truly, have you thought of marrying my daughter?" Whereupon the young man replies, "I have already thought of marrying your daughter. For this reason, I sent a go-between to ask for her."

When all the counselling is done, the father of the young man says, "Do us a favor and take a little of the kindness that God has given us. We bring it into your home."

"Thank you," replies the father of the girl. "If this is what you say, then come when that day arrives."

1. Consuegro is a Spanish name applied to the relationship of the young woman's parents to the young man's parents.

The following Saturday, the parents of the young man, the go-between, the young man, his god-parents, and relatives go to the house of the girl. With them, they take turkeys, chocolate, candles, flowers, incense, bread of all kinds, chiles for the turkey. When they arrive at the girl's home where awaits her relatives, the go-between says to the family, "Do a little favor by taking this little bit of kindness which God gives to your consuegro." It is received with thanks. The young man's relatives are politely told to be seated. For awhile they sit around and smoke. The young man kneels in front of the altar whereupon the relatives of the girl counsel him. This is followed by the drinking of chocolate.

The next day, Sunday, very early in the morning the young man goes to the house of the girl, sweeps the patio and street in front of their home, and brings a load of firewood. Later in the day, the god-mother of the girl's baptism and the god-mother of the girl's confirmation bring three pounds of chocolate, two pieces of sweet bread, two pieces of white bread, two pesos, and biscuits. The family of the young man again go to the home of the girl taking mescal, tepache,<sup>1</sup> pop, cigars, and tortillas. All of them eat together and thereby the pact is sealed. Usually one to three months pass before they are married. If too long a time will pass before they can get married in the church, the couple will go to live together. At one time, this must have constituted the tribal ceremony for, in their minds, they are just as much married as the church ceremony makes them.

## 2/ Declaration of The Coming Marriage:

The father and mother of the bride-to-be, the parents of the groom-to-be, and four young unmarried men who serve as witnesses, go to the church. First, the young

1. Mescal and tepache are native drinks made from the maguey cactus plant. The latter is said not to be intoxicating.

confesses to the priest, then the girl. After mass, the priest announces to the congregation the coming marriage of the couple. This is done three Sundays in a row before the church ceremony takes place.

#### 4. Marriage Ceremony and Celebration

Before the wedding, the father of the groom goes out and secures a god-father and mother for the groom. If the father wants two sets of god-parents then this man must go and get another god-father and mother.

In order that he might have an idea of how many people to prepare for, the father of the groom goes to the house of the bride and asks how many of their relatives to expect and how many turkeys it will take to feed them. If the father of the groom has pigs, bulls, and goats, he will kill some of these for many of his relatives and friends will be at the marriage feast of his son. Usually, the feast is held at the home of the groom but sometimes the god-parents will hold in their home.<sup>1</sup>

The day of the wedding, the go-between goes to the house of the bride carrying flowers, incense burner, copal (incense), rosary of flowers, and candle. These are put in front of the patron saint of the girl.

Early in the morning, usually before eight, the bride goes to the house of the woman who will dress her. The bride's dress is of white satin decorated with lace and ribbons. In former days, the god-parents used to buy the dress but now the groom gives the bride her outfit. New earrings and beads are put on, the long black braids are made into curls, her face is powdered and rouged, a veil and flowers crown her head, and a wreath of artificial flowers is put around her neck. In her hand, she carries a spray or bouquet of white flowers. Probably for the first time in her life she wears white stockings and shoes.

1. Formerly, the rule was for the god-parents to have it but the custom seems to be in a period of change.

The groom usually wears a white shirt, colored tie which is usually a gay bandana, black pants, and a new sombrero.

The other participants in the wedding party wear what they please. All the clothes are usually new; the women folk always get new aprons, except the bride and this is one time when she does not wear one.

Just before the bridal procession starts for the church fireworks are set off. The village band strikes up their music and leads the way to the church. which is a walk of about half a mile from the plaza, or the center of town. At a recent wedding one of the richer members of the town hired a car for his daughter so that she would not have to walk to the church.

The first part of the ceremony takes place in the lobby of the church after the priest and two helpers arrive. One helper has a candle while the other has a long pole that is topped with gold leaf and a cross. Before the ceremony, the god-father lends the groom thirteen pesos in silver, a silver chain<sup>1</sup> of which are silver twenty-cent pieces, and a silver ring<sup>2</sup>. The ceremony is read, the groom puts the ring on the finger of the bride and the priest puts a ring on the finger of the groom. More of the ceremony is read, then the priest takes the thirteen pesos, which was put in a silver dish, and gives it to the groom, saying, "Take the money".

"Who will take it?" questions the groom.

"I will take it," answers the bride. Whereupon she cups her hands under the groom's hands, receives the money, and places it in the other silver plate.

Taking the bride's hand, the groom leads her into the church and up to the altar in front of which they both kneel. The god-father takes the chain and loops it around their shoulders. After a candle is lit, the god-father puts a shawl around their shoulders.

1. Several chains are kept in town to lend out for the occasion, as also are the rings
2. No one can be married with a gold ring until after they have been married 25 years

After the mass is held, the god-father takes the shawl and chain off leaving the chain around the shoulders of the groom. The wedding party then leaves the church and preceded by the band, they make their way to the place where the festivities will take place.

When those who stayed at the house to prepare the food and see that all was in readiness hear the music, they go out and sprinkle water on the ground from the entrance of the yard to the door of the house. Fireworks are set off. At one wedding guests were given little bags of rice to throw at the couple when they entered.

Upon entering the house, they salute one another. This salute is unique in that it is only given at weddings. The bridal party lines up and the guests which are from the groom's side of the house, approach them. Lightly they take hold of each other's shoulders and then with the left touching right shoulder of other person, and vice versa, they give the greetings "S'jaan" , which is comparable to hello. Thus each individual salutes the bridal party.

A table is decorated and all the guests that can, sit down and are served. When they are finished, other guests will come and eat until all have been served. The meal consists of four courses. The first is hot chocolate <sup>1</sup> served with individual bread ; the second is a dish that is made up of scrambled eggs, pieces of pork, garlic, onions, and a rich chicken broth , a large pile of hot tortillas are put on the table and are eaten with this and the following dish; the third is turkey with a hot sauce made of chiles, tomatoes, garlic, onions, all blended together; the last, is a frothy sweet chocolate and corn starch dish and the wedding bread. If the one who is putting on the feast is rich they might serve another dish before the turkey which is a delicious broth with large pieces of beef, goat meat, or pork. Each guest comes with a basket and dishes in which to place all that cannot be eaten. This is a custom for all the feasts that are attended for it would take a long time for one to

1. Their chocolate is made into pats after grinding and blending together the cocoa bean, cinnamon, and sugar. This is always drunk on important occasions.

eat all that was served. A garland of leaves is given to each one and a small bouquet of branches made up from a special bush the name of which is "flower of the wedding dance". The guests thank one another for the food as well as those who are in the room at the time. Rising, they face the altar, meditate briefly, cross themselves, and go outside. The bride and groom and god-parents are the last to eat.

Out side and in the kitchen, friends and relatives of the family are constantly cooking, making tortillas, and preparing the chocolate so that each time people are served, the food is hot and very delicious. These people, at one time, were the recipients of help or food from the groom's father and are now paying it back.

At one o'clock or a little later, the band leaves and goes to the home of the bride. From there, the relatives and friends of the bride will be escorted with music to the home of the groom. Meanwhile, all is hustle and bustle at the groom's home, cleaning and straightening the large room in preparation for the arrival of the bride's relatives. The bridal party forms a line on one side of the room when they hear them coming. When all are in the room, they all form a body opposite to the bridal party. A spokesman steps forward and addresses the groom's father, "Pardon us for coming into your shelter". He is quickly assured by the other that it is their shelter. Back and forth goes the formal greeting. When all necessary greetings have been done, including that of the salut to the bridal party, the guests will sit down and eat.

Not much except eating and visiting goes on during the day, even the intoxicating liquors are served later except for a toast to the bride and groom. The hostess comes along and pours a glass of mescal or tepache and hand it to a guest who, in turn, would hold it up to her. Making a cross with her finger and thumb, the hostess blessed it and the guest immediately drank it.

At night, there is dancing and merry-making but the bride, groom and god-parents do not take part in anything except to watch all that goes on. At a special time which everyone sets individually, so it seems for it varies, the wedding party leaves and goes to the home of the bride <sup>1</sup> taking turkey, mescal, tepache with them. Some of the turkey is put on the altar. Sitting down, they talk and drink and then go out and dance. The bride and groom kneel in front of the altar <sup>2</sup> and are counselled by the bride's parents and relatives and god-parents.<sup>3</sup> Taking the gifts which consist of a trunk built on high legs given to her by her parents, a metate (a grinding stone built on three small legs) given to her by the god-mother of her confirmation, dresses, aprons, slips, mexican sandals, shoes, shawls, colored cloth, and dishes. If the father is rich, he will bestow many gifts on his daughter. Each cousin and relative of the bride buy her some piece of clothing as a gift. The uncles and aunts give the father money for gifts for the bride. The groom's folks do not give any gifts. Each relative of the groom takes one of the gifts, one man puts the trunk on his back, another puts the metate, etc. until all the gifts are taken. The band begins to play and when they all come out into the yard, all will dance with the gifts that they have. Completing a dance, all march down the street in the direction of the groom's house headed by the band; at every turn, all stop and the band will play the dance tune and all will dance with the gifts that they have. Upon reaching the yard of the groom's house, they dance then enter the house and leave the gifts.

Finally the bride and groom's turn to dance comes but they do not dance with one another but with their god-parents: the bride with the god-father, and the groom with the god-mother.

1. If their home is closer, the god-parents might have them go to their place.
2. The following account varies with each individual wedding but the main points are all included such as the dancing of the gifts, counselling, etc.
3. The counselling consists of things such as: be good to your wife, don't beat her.. this to the groom; to the bride, obey your husband, don't leave him, etc.

When they finish dancing, they will sit around and visit or dance some more. The bride and groom go to their house which is in the same patio. Then the men and women, each carrying the bunch of branches received earlier in the day, go over to where the bride and groom are. The music begins and the couple comes out of the house starting for the other place. Their progress is retarded by the people who sing and wave the branches in front of them. Finally they get to the other building and enter the room where the altar is and kneel in front of it. They are again counselled by the god-parents and the relatives of the groom. With this the wedding festivities are over.

#### 5 Final Celebration:

In two days, the god-parents return to get the chain that has been around the neck of the groom. They eat chocolate, bread, and then leave.<sup>1</sup>

The next day (three days after the wedding), the groom's folks and the newly married couple go to the bride's house. With them, they take mescal, tepache, pop, cigars, tortillas, and turkey. When they have finished eating dinner, all the relatives of both the bride and groom drink. Sometimes, they have the marimba or the town band at this time and will dance until they all get so drunk that they can do nothing but go home.

1. Sometimes they wait until the next day to take off the chain. The couple will kneel again in front of the altar, are counselled, and the chain is removed.