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CUSTOMS RELATING TO COURTSHIP
(Ocotlan Zapotec)

D. Olson

Termination of courtship is a family affair and a boy wishing to marry a girl has to "sweat through" more than one ordeal before the marriage is completed. The following is a description of some of the customs related to courtship among the Zapotec Indians.

The young man who may be between the ages of fifteen to twenty is interested in marrying. The girl may have been an old schoolmate or one of the local girls he may have met elsewhere. Every Sunday afternoon the solteros or young men sit or stand at the street corners of the village; they wait until some eligible girl walks by. If she pleases him he may try to walk with her in the direction she goes; if she is interested she will talk to him, if not she will walk all the faster without saying a word. They may talk together briefly and if the boy wishes to pursue the contact he may wait until she goes by again on subsequent occasions.

The culturally accepted courtship times are chance meetings on the street or in the market in view of the public. The boy never goes to the house of the girl; he cannot take her to parties or games. The girl never introduces the boy to anyone of her family. If the girl goes anywhere outside the village she is accompanied by some older trustworthy person or her mother. She is never permitted out after dark unless in approved circumstances. The parents of the girl supposedly do not even know who the admirer is. In fact the boy may not even know who the parents of the girl are.

Promiscuity among the young people is very rare; consequently the birth rate of illegitimate children is almost zero.

If the boy and the girl decide to marry he hires a representative to go to her house and ask permission to marry the girl. This representative is a "specialist" and the success of the mission is sometimes felt to depend on his ability to talk right. Sometimes the

local priest is asked to be the representative.

The representative goes alone to the house of the girl to ask her parents; he leaves the request at the home and leaves. In two or three weeks he returns for the si or yes. In the meantime the parents and any other relative discuss the proposal and decide if the young man is suitable for the girl. When the representative returns if the answer is yes they invite him in for something to eat or drink. If the answer is no they do not invite him in but leave him at the door, even though it is the priest! Sometimes the parents or sister or brother of the girl get very angry that the boy should ask for the girl. They may have found out by inquiring that the boy does not work well in the fields, or he spends too much time loafing in town. If the boy does not please the family they do everything to stop the couple from seeing each other.

If the family is in accord with the joining in marriage they proceed to make elaborate plans for the wedding. If the answer is no the two young people may elope which is thought to be very bad, or they may part their ways. In one case the ^hmay left town apparently brokenhearted and the girl became a nun after advice from the padre.

Don Olson
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