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## **The Historical Geography of Santa María Ixcatlan, Oaxaca**

**Research Year:** 1996

**Culture:** Mixtec

**Chronology:** Colonial

**Location:** Oaxaca, México

**Site:** Santa María Ixcatlan

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### **Research**

This is a report of the research activities conducted with funds granted by the Foundation for the Advancement of Mesoamerican Studies, Inc. between September 9 and November 18, 1995. Three weeks of this period were devoted to archival research in México City and Oaxaca. The remainder of the time was employed conducting fieldwork in the community of Santa María Ixcatlan, Oaxaca.

Locating historical documents concerning Ixcatlan met with varied success. At the Fondo Reservado of the Biblioteca Nacional de México I was able to consult the papers of Luis Gómez Daza in the Archivo de la Tenencia de la Tierra en la Provincia de Puebla. The records contained in box 52 of this archive relate to territorial dispute which erupted in response to the ojo de vista conducted to reconfirm the municipal boundary of Ixcatlan in 1894. Gómez was a lawyer who represented the interests of Hermenegildo Mendoza y Pacheco and the ex-cacicazgo de Zapotitlan de Salinas in the state of Puebla, who challenged the boundary markers proposed by the Ixcatecs. At

one time the Pacheco family had controlled land which they claimed was usurped by Ixcatlan and other neighboring settlements in the state of Oaxaca. The government of Puebla believed this territory should be returned to its jurisdiction. The conflict could not be settled by local authorities or representatives from the two states involved. Finally a commission was appointed by President Porfirio Díaz to resolve the issue. This federal commission eventually issued a ruling favoring the Oaxacan interests in the case. I had hoped to find other legal documents relating to this same case and other regional conflicts in the archives of the Supreme Court, but my efforts did not produce any results.

In Oaxaca, I was granted access to the court records from the districts of Teotitlán de Camino and Cuicatlan, which are preserved at the Archivo General del Poder Judicial. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any materials which directly related to any legal action which involved Ixcatlan. However, the regional office of the Secretaría de Reforma Agraria allowed me to view their files of pending cases from the Ixcatlan area, materials which I had not been permitted to consult in the past. These documents provided an interesting insight into the events of the last sixty years in which the agency has been involved. For example, the correspondence from the officials of San Miguel Guautla indicated that they had formed an alliance with San Pedro Nodon, San Juan Bautista Coixtlahuaca, and San Miguel Tequixtepec for the purpose of controlling communal lands belonging to the Ixcatec. While in Oaxaca, I also acquired recent economic data about Ixcatlan, as well as modern maps and aerial photographs, from the office of the Instituto Nacional de Estadística Geográfica e Informativa (INEGI).

The documents which are still preserved in the municipal archive of Ixcatlan are among the most important sources for the history of the community. I was allowed to view them over a brief period of time and make an audio recording from their contents. They relate primarily to the affairs of the ruling family of nobles and chronicle the succession of the Ixcatec caciques for 200 years, beginning in the late sixteenth century. The records were first seen by Cook during his visit to the community in 1948 and summarized in the appendix to his study of Ixcatlan (Cook, 1958). Many more details about the colonial period are contained in the original manuscripts.

Fieldwork was conducted in Ixcatlan with the primary goal of locating the many place names which appear in the historical documents. Native guides and informants helped me to become familiar with the local geography, provided toponyms for geographic features throughout the region, and directed me to historical sites. With their assistance I was able to reconnoiter approximately half of the 45,000 hectares of the municipality which is south of a line that extends from San Pedro Nodon on the east to Cerro Negro on the west. My attempt to visit the northern section of the community was precluded by the untimely death of my guide, Don Aristeo, one of the few Ixcatecs who actively worked land in the north and regularly traveled into that region. He died while tending his lime trees that grow along the banks of the Río Xiquila less than one week after my arrival in town.

The location of Nopala, Coyula, and Teopotongo, the three subordinate communities to Ixcatlan that appear on the map which accompanies the *relación geográfica* from the

area (Velásquez de Lara, 1579), was of particular interest to me. These settlements were abandoned not long after the *relación* was prepared. Using the clues from the colonial documents, I found the three historical sites along the northern slopes of the mountain range which extends across the middle of the municipality. The remains of a small church and atrium allowed for a positive identification of Spanish presence at each locality. These structures were built with local limestone in a pattern which combined large blocks in a matrix of smaller stones. This style of architecture is known elsewhere in the Mixteca Atla.

It was discovered during the excavation of the nearby postclassic site at Coixtlahuaca (Bernal, 1949) and is also manifest among the early colonial period buildings in the Nochixtlán Valley (Spores, 1974). The Ixcatec also employed this method of construction which was common among the Chocho and Mixtec.

Although Cook (1952) did not have first hand knowledge of this remote area, he concluded that the depopulated region north of the modern community was void of water and too arid to support habitation. In reality, each of the former colonial settlements was established in the transition area between the high mountains and lowlands, allowing their populations to use the varied climates and resources of both ecological zones. They also had access to permanent water supplies. Until recently, *palenques* for distilling mezcal were utilized by the men of Ixcatlan not far from the ruins of Teopotongo and Coyula. The process of making liquor from the maguey requires a dependable water supply. These distilleries were only abandoned because of their distance from town. Nopala is the farthest of the three sites from Ixcatlan. Nevertheless, livestock owners graze their horses and cattle in the vicinity to take advantage of the stream of water which consistently runs through the ravine just below the ruins there. These areas, although they do not possess abundant moisture, do have sufficient to sustain life. The presence of pre-Columbian constructions in close proximity to the colonial sites indicates that they were inhabited for centuries before the imposition of Spanish influence in the region.

While pursuing the identification of the places named in the historical records, I had the opportunity to locate numerous archaeological sites in the municipality. Although very little is known about the pre-Columbian culture of Ixcatlan, I am able to report that the area was well populated from at least the Classic period, if not before. I can only assume that earlier, Formative period constructions will yet be identified in Ixcatlan with further archaeological investigation.

The remains of ceremonial centers and small settlements can be found throughout the region, particularly in the defensible positions along the mountain ridges. The ancient inhabitants of Ixcatlan also constructed check dams in the barrancas and terraces across the mountain slopes to create plots for farming the higher elevations near their dwellings. This preference for locating settlements in these defensive settings is one which has been associated with the Flores phase (500-1000 A.D.) among the neighboring Mixtec (Spores, 1972). Although no surface collection of cultural materials was undertaken as part of this project, the examination of ceramic sherds scattered

among the Ixcatec sites indicates the strong presence of gray wares and course red wares, which are common at the Classic period sites of Mixtec Alta (ibid.).

The most noteworthy archaeological site that I have seen has a walled precinct with 11 pyramid structures and an adjoining residential area located on the ridge above the Río Santiago. This fortified center is reminiscent of the defensive construction found at neighboring Quiotepec, which is believed to have been an outpost on the frontier of the Zapotec empire ruled from Monte Albán (Redmond, 1983). On one of the structures I found two carved stones that had figures similar in form and content to the Borgia group of codices and the iconography from the archaeological site at Tizatlán, Tlaxcala (Noguera, 1929), which were produced during the Postclassic. Stamped bottom bowls, which are rare in ceramic remains of the Mixtec Alta (Spores, 1972), and what appears to be Coxcatlán Red on Cream (MacNeish, 1970) on the surface of some Ixcatec sites may confirm the introduction of a cultural influence from the north, perhaps the Tehuacán Valley, during the Venta Salada phase (700-1500 A.D.). Ixcatlan seems to have experienced a converging of ideas and material cultures from several distinct groups in the remote past. Further survey and excavation will be necessary to unravel its cultural history.

While in Ixcatlan I was also able to collect folk tales and oral history from several informants. Ixcatecos related to me the story of the origin of the palm tree in the region, the arrival of El Señor de las Tres Caídas, the cave in the Peña del Águila, and the enchantment of San Juan Viejo (Coyula). They also spoke of events in more recent history such as the battles fought locally during the Revolution and the efforts to modernize the community in the twentieth century. Some of their most graphic historical remembrances focus on the violent disputes that Ixcatlan had with its neighbors during the two decades from 1945-65. The encounters with Guautla and Tequixtepec in which Ixcatecos were kidnapped and murdered are still recounted with much emotion. Although the communities involved are now able to talk about their differences without resorting to violence, the history that they share has not been easily forgotten by those who were directly involved.

The opportunity given me by the Foundation to conduct this project has added considerably to an understanding of the history and geography of Ixcatlan. I am confident that even more knowledge about the area and its people will yet be extracted from the data and resources that I gained from this investigation, once they are all analyzed.

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