

DANIEL RUBIN**DE LA BORBOLLA,****PIONEER IN MEXICAN****ANTHROPOLOGY**

Juan Luis Campos

Cultural enterprises tend to be more difficult than economic ones, but usually they last longer. After the Revolution shook the Mexican nation there were many tasks to be undertaken. One of these was that of saving, studying and promoting the different cultural manifestations of the Mexican people. The science of anthropology had only glanced at the fertile soil of Mexico. There was much work to be done.

Daniel Fernando Rubín de la Borbolla, born in the city of Puebla in 1907, became a physical anthropologist in the United States and England. He has participated in numerous cultural enterprises, one of the most important being his archaeological explorations in Monte Albán, Oaxaca. He has worked for a policy where the indigenous peoples are the ones who protect their own cultures. Due to his interest in teaching, he founded the National School of Anthropology and History. As an active advocate of popular art both in Mexico as well as in other countries, he has worked on projects in museums and also wrote the book, *Arte Popular Mexicano, 1974 (Mexican Popular Art)* that will soon be re-edited. He was the principal promoter of the cultural Olympics which were held parallel to the Olympic Games of 1968 in Mexico. This interview gives us a glimpse of the tasks required of a man who tirelessly gives himself to work for the nation's cultural heritage.

INTERVIEW WITH DANIEL RUBIN DE LA BORBOLLA

You were a pioneer in Mexican anthropology. What were your first jobs?

When I returned to Mexico after studying physical anthropology in the United States and England at the end of the 1920's, I found that the position of the Head of the Department of Physical Anthropology of the National Museum was vacant. I was named head of the Department and was the youngest authority/researcher. There were many people working in the Museum for years, one of whom was Don Andrés Molina Enríquez, a renowned citizen from the Revolution. Luis Castillo had been director of the Museum for about 15 years and Alfonso Caso was head of the Department of Archaeology. Miguel Othón de Mendizabal was in charge of the Department of Ancient History, now known as Ethnohistory. Thus, I became part of this institution and soon became very good friends with Antonio Caso. He was thinking of working with Don Manuel Gamio, one of the most famous anthropologists of America and explorer of Teotihuacán.

At that point Alfonso Caso and I joined the project that was the exploration of the Ceremonial Center of Monte Alban, Oaxaca. When the first exploration was still being planned, Manuel Gamio was named Under-secretary of Education. Thus, with the economic and scientific support of Gamio, Alfonso Caso and I began the exploration of Monte Albán.

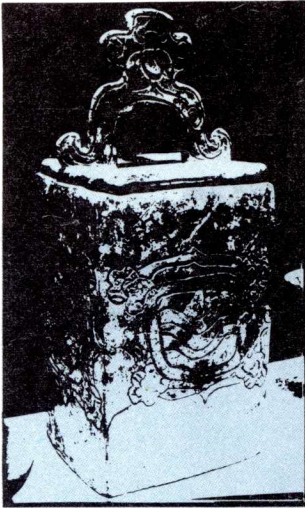
At that time two neighboring indigenous Zapotec villages, Xoxo and Atzompa had made an agreement with the State and Federal Governments to build a road from the valley of Oaxaca up to the top of the mountain where the archaeological site was located. Their only condition was that they be given tools, bricks, limestone and cement. With this equipment they built a narrow nine and a half kilometer (6 mile) road.

In order to begin the explorations, we chose the persons who best knew the area, both old and young people. This was towards the end of 1931. We made our first plan according to the number of people we were able to pay. At that point the work was one of cleaning the area of all the brush and weeds so that we could see the situation of the monuments.

Alfonso and I realized that we could not continue with the project if we did not have more economic support from the Government, since our work involved cleaning the entire central part of the great ceremonial zone. This zone began to appear as rubble and we had no budget to continue working on it. Trusting that Manuel Gamio of the Education



Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla. Family album photo.



Ministry would give us support, we decided that Alfonso Caso would be in charge of the exploration and restoration of the buildings and I would direct the explorations in the north cemetery which was the nearest to the archaeological zone. This required a small team of workers, together with a foreman and a manager who had had a great deal of experience working with Gamio in the exploration of Teotihuacán. So the work began before 1932.

Six tomb sites were discovered with stones and two of them had actual tombs of stones with covers, but these were empty. We could not tell if these two tombs had had things taken from them. The other four tomb sites were very small with skeletons and some clay objects. This told us that we were not in the center of the zone but that we were very near the burial area which was to be called the great cemetery.

But then something happened that none of us had expected. One day, another of our helpers, Juan Valenzuela, who had studied archaeology at the Department of Philosophy and at the National Museum, found an opening where the ground was sifting through in a patio. This indicated that it was probably a tomb. Seeing this, Juan Bazán (foreman of the workers), Valenzuela and I speculated that we were near a tomb, probably a large one, and so we started to look for an entrance in the patio.

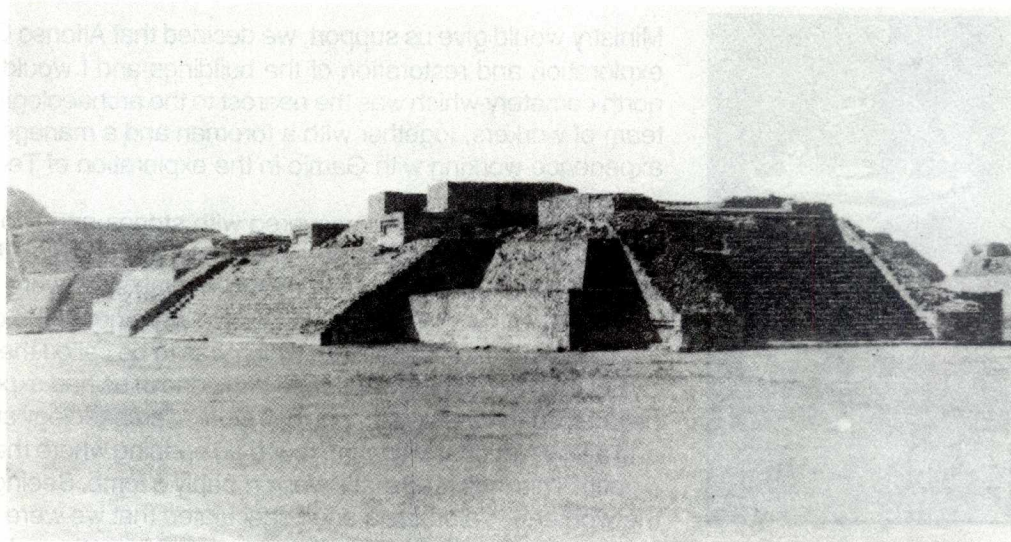
Two days later we found the entrance to the tomb and decided that nothing had been touched and that no objects had been taken out of the tomb. At the entrance there were three enormous clay urns of some goddesses, a very large tablet and another piece of tablet that was covering the entrance. Once we opened this we found the place where the dirt was filtering through and falling around the tomb where bones and objects were all mixed together. It seemed that someone had found the tomb and had taken all that was there in order to bury everything a second time. We found an object made of gold and other things that revealed that this was probably the burial place of some very important persons. At that time, Alfonso Caso returned from Mexico City, where he had gone to ask for a budget increase. We had an idea of what the tomb represented, though we did not know how many people were buried there. The situation told us that there was great richness and also great poverty.

Caso and I decided to tell the federal authorities about the news and we went to the telegraph office in Oaxaca. Apparently the head of this office and the telegraph workers got wind of what had been discovered and spoke with the journalists of the city. The next day the news was out in Mexico City as well as in Oaxaca: tomb number seven had been discovered with a large treasure that was comparable to that of Tutenkamen. Everyone began to tell stories that made the find more and more important and things started to get out of hand. We had to advise the Governor of the state who had not yet been told. This was a very hard incident since it was the governor who should have supposedly notified the Education Secretary. Here there was definitely a misunderstanding, probably not on our part, but he was very upset with the situation and let it be known. We had to ask for the help of the army because the village people started to tell stories that grew out of proportion, and everyone began to go up the mountain on foot or however they could to see the great treasure. What they found was nothing more than some people in a hole in the distance.

We worked very slowly because we took 10 square centimeters at a time and explored this area. Thus we finished working the width of the tomb, taking out the dirt with very fine paint brushes. In this way we were able to find the objects in their places and draw them in situ so we could later reconstruct all that had been found. We classified everything that was found by putting numbers on the objects and cleaning them a little to have an idea of what each object was. Since we found bones that were in a very altered state, destroyed by the change from the previous burial (we still don't know where this came from) and thrown there, the work was twice as complicated. If this had been the first burial, it would have been much easier, but since it was the second burial we were confronted with a much more difficult situation with all that had been thrown into the tomb. Our anxiety grew somewhat with the news that was being broadcast every day.

What was in the collection?

The collection consisted of the jewelry of great lords. There were some large pectorals with pearl beads, gold beads that were molded in wax, as well as turquoise and coral beads. There were necklaces with gold threads and beads and also bracelets. We found



Monte Albán, Oaxaca. Photo by Alejandra Novoa.

a figure of a deity molded in wax and another large pectoral of another god that is half gold and half silver. There was a total of some eight kilograms of raw gold in all, as well as other objects: jewels and very delicately carved bones that were like stories that told something which we could not decipher overnight.

In this period it was thought that the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs had finally united and had formed one culture. This was an hypothesis because there were not sufficient data to prove it but we thought that these bones would probably give us the key to the relation between the Mixtecs and the Zapotecs.

And is that what happened?

No, it was not like that. That writing was a Mixtec writing, the burial is undoubtedly a Mixtec one. All this was buried in Zapotec land. Why? We just don't know.

The newspapers started to tell all different kinds of stories and especially started to accuse us that they were not permitted access so that they could not see what we were hiding and everything that we took out of the tomb. This gave the Governor the opportunity to tell the Federal Government just what a complicated situation we had created with the authorities. This also made it easy for the Secretary of Education to come and investigate what was happening.

The Federal Government decided to protect the treasures from a Federal point of view which provoked the wrath of the Governor. With all the reason in the world, the Governor asked that the treasure of tomb number seven be shown to the people. Fortunately the Federal Government had restored an old and beautiful building in the center of the city of Oaxaca. This was to be the Regional Museum, created with the object of putting the collection there.

Alfonso continued the explorations and I was in charge of conditioning the first museum in the state of Oaxaca. This was the first archaeological museum which we called the Regional Museum of Oaxaca. I knew nothing about the care or running of museums nor did I have any idea on how to exhibit the pieces. I was able to obtain some glass cabinets that came from Mexico City and others that were lent to me by some Oaxacan businessmen. So, with the help of Mrs. Caso and that of Alfonso when he came back from Monte Albán in the afternoons, the exhibition was set up.

The Secretary of Education came together with the Governor and this provoked another incident. The Governor took for granted that this collection would permanently stay in Oaxaca and then he committed another error. He proclaimed a decree that his representatives approved, saying that the collection was property of the people and the State Government of Oaxaca. This started a clash among public officials. It was a dangerous clash because the collection was in the city of Oaxaca.

Finally, Caso and I together with a federal official decided to close the Museum temporarily, and I had to pack up the collection and take it to a train station outside the

city. I boarded a first class wagon that had been added to an ordinary train, and left with the collection. There was nothing else that we could do in light of the danger that the local authorities might discover what was going on. Before I knew it, I was in the wagon that had been put at my disposal under guard by soldiers from the army and the next day the train arrived at Mexico City.

The National Museum located right next to the National Palace had an enormous vaulted chamber where the gold and silver bars were kept when it was the Mint. The collection was deposited in this huge room and there was a declaration stating that the collection from tomb number seven had been assigned a special salon so that the whole world could admire it. Then the Governor of Oaxaca committed the foolishness of legally charging the Secretary of Education and the National Museum as usurpers of treasures that belonged to the people of Oaxaca.

The excavations continued under the care of Caso and Juan Bazán. I took charge of the installation of the objects from tomb seven in the Museum of Mexico. Alfonso's wife came and helped me, especially with the jewelry display. The collection was opened to the public of Mexico almost one month after it arrived in the City in 1932.

The collection remained there until President Lázaro Cárdenas visited Oaxaca in 1935 or 1936. The people directly asked him to return the jewels to Oaxaca. With a great deal of tact, Cardenas told the people: "Yes, this is a great treasure that has been studied and catalogued. I know this because I have visited the collection a couple of times. I will give the order that a selection be made and put back in the museum in Oaxaca along with the objects that have come out of other tombs of the same region." And once again I was in charge of setting up this museum.

I no longer felt that I was an archaeologist or an anthropologist. I felt like, well I don't know, like a curator because for a long time I had been doing things that were outside my field. But I had to do them because that was what was needed, and also because the Director of the Museum had had instructions from the Secretary of Education that I should do this work. So there I was.

Do you remember other cultural enterprises that you undertook?

In 1941, I convinced the Ministry of Education that all the linguists of Mexico should be gotten together since there was the idea of a literacy campaign. Many indigenous peoples did not have alphabets for their languages and thus different linguists had created sounds for the distinct alphabets which not even the linguists understood. In other words there was real confusion. The idea was to have an alphabet that could take care of the phonetic problems of each language. Since there were 36 languages it was a successful event when the linguists arrived at a consensus and formed one alphabet after a week of clashes and fights. This was the first great success of anthropology.

You were able to get these people together?

I got the people together and was the president of the debating sessions. I wanted them to feel comfortable in fighting it out and I only intervened when there was a consensus about a sign that was the same in Spanish with only some type of special mark used above or below the symbol. That is how the common alphabet for all the indigenous people was formed. The objective then was to make the matrixes in linotype since millions of reading primers had to be produced for the literacy campaign of the indigenous peoples. It was a primer in their own language so that once it was learned and the people were familiar with the alphabet they could learn the Spanish language. This was the program created by the Ministry of Education. But the moulds had to be casted.

I had the opportunity of being invited to the Chicago Museum to give some conferences. I took advantage of this trip to visit the Morgenthaller Company, under commission of the Education Ministry. This business was the only one which made linotypes and the corresponding moulds or matrixes. I made a date with the company and the director told me: "Leave the drawings for us to study, this is a very special case. I can tell you right now that we don't have even half of the matrixes and that it will be necessary to make a special matrix for each one. This will cost money, but leave it with me and I will get back to you with an answer before you leave the country." The answer was that this collection of special matrixes would cost about 30,000 dollars. I did not have the authority to make a decision like this one. I thanked him and took back the drawings. I said to him: "Look,





Mexico (it came from the heart) is trying to teach reading and writing to a population that speaks more than 36 different languages besides Spanish. We are not a rich country and we cannot spend 30,000 dollars in matrixes. Thank you for your project and I will hand it over to the Mexican Government with my recommendations. But I think that it will be very difficult for Mexico at this moment to embark on an adventure of 30,000 dollars. At least I cannot decide this."

I returned to Mexico, made out the report and handed it in. At the same time a letter arrived from the company in Chicago saying that since it was a company that in a certain sense was responsible for the progress of education in the world, through its linotypes, it had taken the special case of Mexico into consideration. Since Mexico had a very definite literacy program, the company decided that it would make a donation of 20,000 dollars to the project if the Mexican Government would commit itself to pay the other 10,000 dollars. The Government of course accepted the offer and the special alphabet was made for the primers of all the indigenous groups. This was true in all cases except, I think, in one language where the glottal sounds were of such a nature that it was impossible to obtain an exact sound that could be expressed by a letter. And that was how the literacy program started in 1940.

Didn't you also organize a congress of the indigenous peoples of the American continent at the same time?

More or less. In that year, General Cárdenas (the Mexican President) asked Alfonso Caso and myself to organize all the delegations of indigenous communities on the continent. The objective was to discuss common problems within the framework of each country's sovereignty and to look for possible solutions to poverty. It was also to view the situation of the indigenous population in each country and to try to look for a new way within the legal framework of each nation, so that these groups could live as human beings and not as second class citizens. This was a great responsibility for me because I was designated Public Relations Secretary in various countries. On the one hand I had the responsibility of assuring that genuine representatives would come as delegates from each country. Fortunately I was in charge of such important countries as Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama and two Central American countries - I think they were Nicaragua and Honduras. Other delegates, among them Miguel Othón de Mendizábal, were sent to Central and South American countries.

In 1938 Lázaro Cárdenas expropriated the oil industry. In protest England had withdrawn its ambassador and had broken diplomatic relations. The United States had recalled its ambassador but had not withdrawn its embassy nor closed it. Belgium was vacillating between closing its embassy and leaving a representative instead of an ambassador, and most other countries were doing the same. The Standard Oil Company was exerting heavy pressure and the situation was very difficult for Mexico. At this moment the organization of an Interamerican Indigenous Congress was a very daring venture because this aggravated the world situation and the political relations with Mexico even more. Despite all this the Congress was held in May, 1940. There was one fact that helped to alleviate this situation of very difficult political relations for all countries: at this time Roosevelt was the American president and one of his advisors was John Collier, a strong defender of the rights of North American indigenous peoples.

Collier had convinced his president that complete freedom should be given to the indigenous people so that they could govern themselves. No authority could intervene except the Federal Department of Indian Affairs. This fact had deep repercussions at the Congress.

Ramón Bonfil, an excellent teacher and a great pedagogue of extraordinary dimensions, had prepared an Interamerican Literacy Program in Indigenous Languages. I believe that this program has been one of the most important in the world in opening the doors of western civilization to the indigenous population. The program has done this without forcing the people and without pressuring them to forget their language. It proposes that the people continue to use their language and that they have an active participation in saving their own culture. This is the indigenous peoples' philosophy. ■