



Photographs in this page by Dante Barrera



The Canvases of San Miguel Tequixtepec An Age-Old Treasure

*Maria de los Angeles Romero Frizzi**

Located in southern Mexico, Oaxaca is a land of contrasts: it is one of the country's poorest states, but at the same time possessor of an impressive cultural wealth. In the 1980s, the state of Oaxaca had the highest index of marginalization in the entire country, 24.95 percent, which later studies show has not changed substantially.¹

Oaxaca is the state with the largest indigenous population in Mexico: 39.1 percent of its inhabitants speak a Mesoamer-

ican language.² The impoverished heir to the cultures that flourished in these lands in the centuries before the European conquest, its current situation is the fruit of the complex dynamics between indigenous societies and colonial rule (1521-1821) and later the conformation of Mexico as an independent republic. Certainly we can say that the contradictions that unite material poverty with cultural wealth are the result of that history. These precarious living conditions and cultural wealth side by side can be seen in all of Oaxaca's communities, isolated in the mountains and hours away from anywhere else by dirt road or on foot. Usually, visitors to Oaxaca do not notice this situation because they stay only a short time or only see the cap-

ital city and its environs. But, if they roam a little further, they can see the other side of Oaxaca up close. I will cite a single example among hundreds: the town of San Miguel Tequixtepec, in the western part of the state.

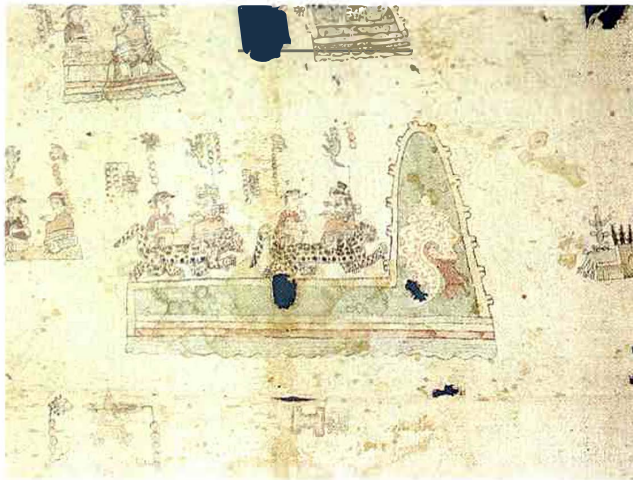
San Miguel Tequixtepec is a small community a few kilometers from the new highway that links Oaxaca city to central Mexico. It is a small town with a few more than 200 families who make their living growing corn and wheat and weaving hats out of palm leaves. The crops are rain fed and it is not unusual for people to lose the entire harvest because, after planting all their land, the rains do not come. This has forced many of the town's inhabitants to emigrate to Mexico

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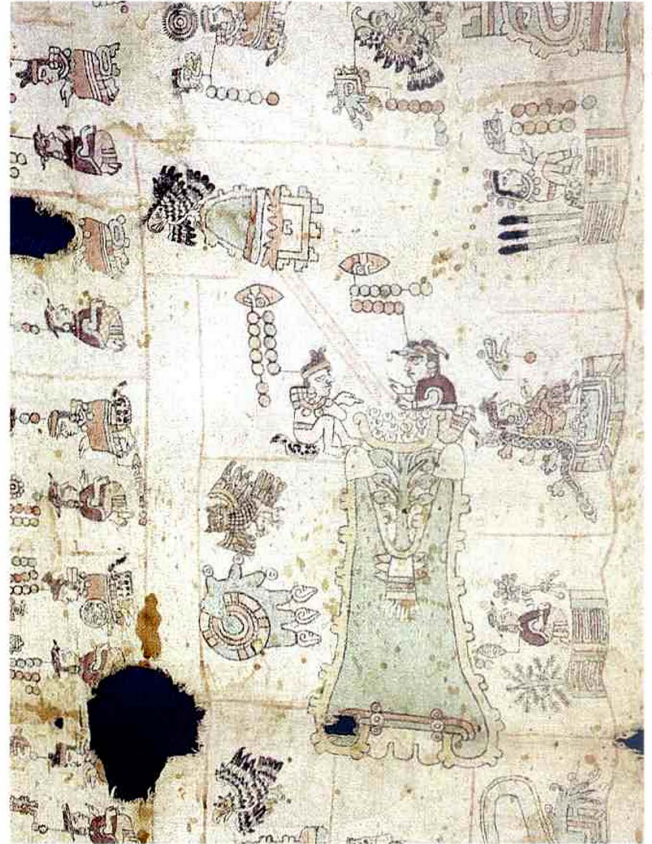
Photographs of Tequixtepec Canvas | reprinted courtesy of the Santo Domingo Cultural Center's Fray Francisco de Burgoa Library.

Right: The light green glyph shows the two volcanoes of Central Mexico. Between them is a tree, the glyph of Huexotzingo, a town that still exists in the state of Puebla. Tequixtepec Canvas I.

Below: Tequixtepec Glyph. The figure of a sea shell surrounded by a hill represents the name of Tequixtepec in the Mesoamerican system of writing. Above the glyph are two royal couples identified by name. Tequixtepec Canvas I.



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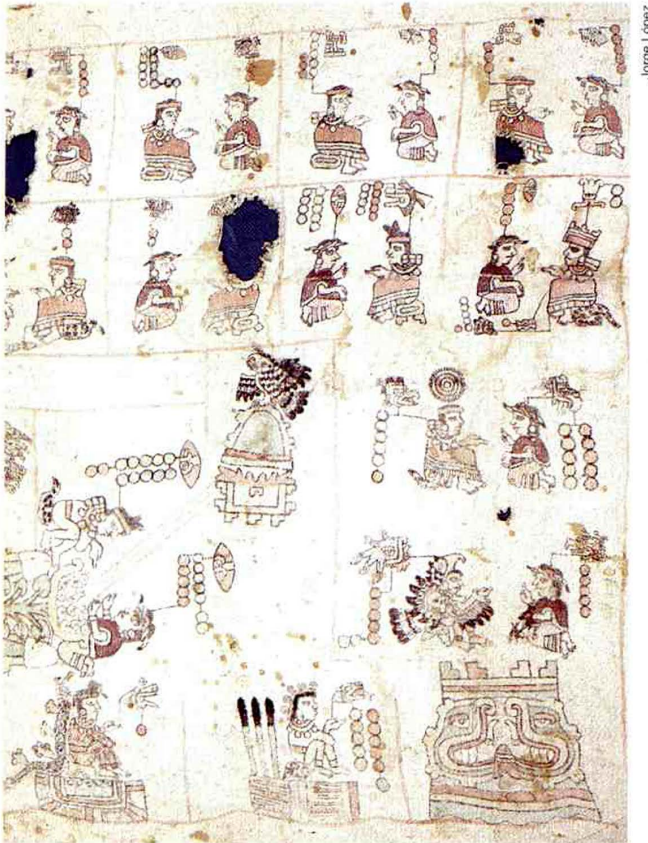
City in search of better living conditions. Those who remain supplement their income by weaving hats out of palm leaves that they sell for a few pesos to intermediaries who give them the final touches and sell them outside the area. Today, San Miguel Tequixtepec is just one more town in Oaxaca, but in ancient times, before the Spanish conquest, it was an important Chocholtec kingdom.³ In the sixteenth century, despite the ravages of the war of conquest, San Miguel Tequixtepec was able to adapt to the new conditions, continuing its intense political life and important economic activities and establish two animal husbandry centers, at that time a very lucrative activity. Two sixteenth century canvases preserved by the town testify to life there in those years.

What kind of canvas are we talking about? Why are they important? About six centuries before the Spanish conquest, Oaxaca's indigenous kingdoms established the custom of representing the most important events in their daily lives and religion in different kinds of documents. Sometimes they were written on long strips of deerskin and spread out like folding screens; other times they were painted on lengths of cotton cloth woven on waist looms. The canvases of San Miguel Tequixtepec, part of this age-old tradition, are of the second type.

The most impressive of the two canvases, called San Miguel Tequixtepec I, is made of four strips of cloth sewn together, measuring 2.90 meters high and 2.35 meters wide. Done in the purest style of

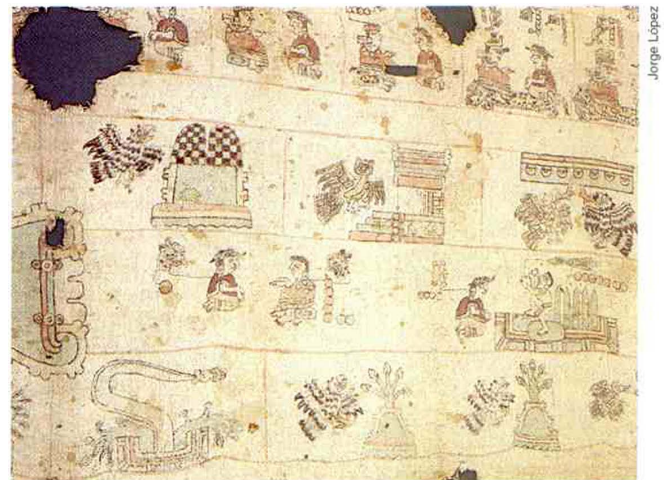
the pre-Hispanic painters, it is a true jewel and work of art of Mesoamerican literature. Examining it carefully, we can see the hand that painted so many details: the mountain lion skin on the rulers' thrones, the snow-capped mountains, the noblewomen's embroidered *huipiles*, the feathers of the eagle gentleman and a thousand more. Thanks to this canvas, we understand precisely what we mean when we say that in a single place we find both wealth and poverty.

In the sixteenth century, Oaxaca's indigenous peoples and those from other parts of Mexico continued their literary tradition. Their writing changed and adapted to the conditions of colonial rule, but continued to be a central part of their lives. There were different kinds of codices, to2



Left: Detail of the origins of the royal lineage of Tequixtepec. The lower right corner shows the glyph for Coixtlahuaca, and above and on the side, the children of the founding couple. Tequixtepec Canvas I.

Below: Tequixtepec's founding fathers traveled the four points of the compass before settling down and starting the town. Tequixtepec Canvas I.



but most important during the colonial period were those that spelled out the rights of the towns over their land. For the Mesoamericans, these documents were sacred books registering the divine origins of their rulers, the lineage of the ruling couples and the map of their lands. Just as the Bible narrates the origin of the Jewish people and its history through its prophets and patriarchs until the time when God led them to the promised land, the codices are Zapotec, Chochootec, Mixtec or other Mesoamerican people's Bibles. They narrate the origin of the founding couple, their feats and the taking of the land that their gods gave them. The San Miguel Tequixtepec canvas deals with these three themes. On the lower part is painted the origin of the couple from whom

the ruling line of San Miguel Tequixtepec descends and then registers the journey that this couple's progeny made through different places until they arrived at the land they took possession of. The central part speaks of the line that governed San Miguel Tequixtepec for centuries. Finally, the upper section is a map with the glyph for San Miguel Tequixtepec, its name in the ancient writing, at the center.

Practically all the communities of Oaxaca must have had a canvas or a map with similar contents, but many were handed over to the colonial and national authorities during litigation over the land down through the years. Others were lost and, in the last century, some were even exchanged for food. Others, however, have been zealously preserved by town officials, among them those

of San Miguel Tequixtepec. Here, the responsibility for caring for the canvas falls to the mayor, but a smaller copy will soon be placed in the local museum so the entire community can see this incredible heritage from its ancestors. Anyone else who wants to see a piece of this Oaxaca of contradictions is also invited. **MM**

¹ Jorge Hernández Díaz, "Condiciones de vida y diferenciación social en la población indígena oaxaqueña." *Cuadernos del Sur* 13 (Oaxaca, Mexico: LABJO-INI-INAH-CIESAS, 1998)

² *Censo de población* (Mexico City: INEGI, 1990).

³ The Chocholecs are one of the 15 ethno-linguistic groups that live in Oaxaca today.