

# Traveling through the Huasteca With Lorenzo

Gerardo Gutiérrez\*

One day in May 1995, about 3:30 in the morning, I was dozing in the back seat of one of those old VW vans that belonged to the UNAM Institute for Anthropological Research. I was exhausted after two days of taking pictures of the Chicomexóchtli ceremony in the community of Sasaltitla, Municipality of Chicontepec. Suddenly, the van door opened and Lorenzo Ochoa's hoarse voice woke me, saying urgently, "Hurry up. They've started killing the chickens. Take your camera and run over there while I put a new roll of film in mine."

I roused myself as best I could and ran toward the house where they were holding the ritual. No fewer than 50 Nahuatl men and women crowded in together were dancing in unison to the repetitious tune of the Huastec violin. At each turn flew the neck of some unfortunate chicken, whose blood splattered all over an altar covered with hundreds of figures of deities cut out of tissue paper.

Less than a minute later, Lorenzo came in the other door; we had the perfect angles for documenting the event. The ceremony was at its most effervescent. Participants were spraying mouthfuls of beer and soft drinks, making it impossible to keep the camera lens dry. Lorenzo made signs for me to move into the group and see what the Huehuetlaca was doing. All by himself in a corner, with his own miniscule altar on the floor, he was killing a little chicken and spraying more tissue-paper figures.

Two women went into a trance. When asked in Nahuatl what Chicomexóchtli had ordered, they responded with very specific directives from the deity and the date the next ceremony was to be held. Suddenly, the Huehuetlaca stood up in his corner and went outside the house to another altar, followed by all the participants. Lorenzo was in a better position to capture the whole outside ritual.

\* Assistant professor, Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado at Boulder.



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About 6 a.m., activities had calmed down and all the participants stopped dancing. Tamales were served and we all ate. At this point, the women began filling their baskets with more tamales, tortillas, *mole* sauce and chicken meat. The men hoisted crates of soft drinks and beer, flowers, candles and more live chickens on their backs. Around 7:30 a.m. we were all climbing a nearby mountain. On the way up, we stopped at three dif-



ferent altars. After the second one, only a group of the men were going to continue the ascent to the top.

Lorenzo and I were debating about whether it would be better to split up to get pictures of what each of the groups did, when the Huehuetlaca told us that the ones who stayed behind were going to prepare the food, so, if we had the energy, the two of us could go to the top. I was dead on my feet, but Lorenzo was as fresh as could be. When I saw his shining face, I knew there was nothing for it but to continue climbing the steep mountainside.

Around midday, we got to the top. The men quickly repaired the altar that was already there. In half an hour, it was covered with flowers, candles and the representations of the gods of the wind and the land cut out of tissue paper. The proper ceremonies were held. The Huehuetlaca and his assistant still had two live chickens. I prepared my camera thinking that at any moment they were going to slaughter them, but they let them go. The altar candles were put out and the Huehuetlaca ordered everyone to go down to join up with the larger group. The last chickens had been left alive as an offering to the “Owner.”

That’s what it was like traveling with Lorenzo Ochoa through the Huasteca. Every journey was exciting. Mountains, plains, coast and lagoon. He knew every nook and cranny, and his network of sources was vast and endless. From the famous “Queen of the Mountain Cats” on the Island of the Idol, to the

Huehuetlaca of Sasaltitla. I accompanied him for two years. I can count almost 180 days of untiring experiences together, in which we walked on mountains, visited markets, navigated in speedboats through the estuaries of the Tamiahua Lagoon and flew in tiny bi-planes from Poza Rica to Tampico.

Lorenzo was a generous man: he shared his knowledge and his stipend. What I enjoyed most about going out into the countryside with him was lunchtime. He had a mental map of the best places to eat from Poza Rica to Tampico, and from El Cabo Rojo to San Luis Potosí. It never failed him. He knew where to find the best *zacahuil* tamales, the best crayfish, the best crab claws, the best salt-water crabs....And if we didn’t pick one of those, we could always make a stop in his hometown, Tuxpan, where he would cook up an excellent alligator-head fish. I’ll always remember him with his draft Corona, eating shrimp on the shell on the boardwalk.

The last time we talked he was very enthused about the class on Mesoamerican urbanism he had taught at the School of Restoration. As always, he was preparing a new trip to the Huasteca. And —also as usual— our conversation turned into an animated debate of ideas and hypotheses. He knew how to listen, but he didn’t give ground easily. You had to convince him with good arguments.

My much-esteemed Lorenzo Ochoa, your friends will miss you, but I know you’ll always find a good *acamaya* crayfish ready for you in the Huasteca. **MM**



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