



Photo by Gabriela Zamorano.

MEXICO

Talea, nestled in the mountains of northern Oaxaca.

## Fifty Years: From Autonomy to Dependence

by Laura Nader and Roberto J. González

**N**ot even the Spanish Conquest could destroy the foundation of knowledge upon which the Zapotec-, Maya-, and Nahuatl-speaking peoples built their respective civilizations. For more than 5,000 years, the indigenous communities of Mesoamerica domesticated and cultivated corn, beans, squash, chilies and other crops to sustain themselves; wove cotton and wool for clothing; constructed entire cities of stone and earth (the remains of which are visible even today); used acupuncture, massage and natural pharmaceuticals for healing; and created stable and durable political institutions.

But over the last 50 years, “development” has accomplished what generations of conquistadors could not achieve: the near destruction of an autonomous indigenous village in the Rincón Zapotec area of Oaxaca, Mexico.

Both of us have watched this process unfold in Talea, a bilingual Zapotec village in Oaxaca: Nader since she initiated

anthropological research there in 1957 and González since the 1990s. We returned to Talea together in the summer of 2006 with a video photographer to document the changes that have transformed the lives of villagers and made them less autonomous and more dependent.

Talea has undergone frequent transformations since the Spaniards founded it in 1528, and with each change knowledge has flowed in and out of the area at variable speeds. In the wake of the Conquest (and as a result of the activism of Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, author of *The Devastation of the Indies*), the Spanish crown took measures to protect indigenous people from the brutal predations of the colonists, establishing “Indian republics” that allowed indigenous people to maintain self-provisioning communities which lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After initial contact, the Zapotec villagers pragmatically adopted crops, technologies and knowledge. Taleans began

raising chickens, pigs, oxen and other animals introduced by Europeans; cultivating Old World crops including oranges, sugar cane and later coffee; using ceramic tiles as roofing material, in the Mediterranean fashion; and preparing their fields for cultivation with plows similar to those used by Spanish peasant farmers.

Other changes swept the region following the Conquest. By the 1700s, silver mining was among the most profitable enterprises in Oaxaca, and lucrative mines were established near Talea which were exploited until the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution in 1910. As a result of their isolated locale, many Taleans began producing goods that the miners needed, including boots, soap, matches, bread and other provisions, and much of the knowledge needed to produce these items was borrowed from outside the region and added to local ingenuity.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the pace of change accelerated in response to international events. The Bracero Program, a Mexican guest worker program created by the United States in the mid-1940s to help meet wartime labor shortages, attracted over a dozen Talean men to work in American agriculture. They returned to Talea with ideas about what

constituted “progress.” They began to plant coffee bushes amidst the corn and beans, and sought transport for their agricultural produce out of the region. They lobbied the Mexican government, and by the 1960s a road was built connecting Talea and the Rincón to the outside, under the auspices of the Papaloapan Commission (a development program modeled after the Tennessee Valley Authority). Potable water and electricity followed in rapid succession.

Talea and the region were transformed. The road that was to allow the export of coffee, fruit, avocados and other crops simultaneously enabled merchants to import consumer goods that undermined the regional economy. The road also made it easier for large numbers of people to migrate out of the village, and today there are hundreds of Talean natives living and working in Los Angeles, Seattle, New York and other cities throughout the U.S.

In the wake of this tidal wave, some Talean knowledge was forgotten; some was erased; some was plundered; some was abolished; and later, some was reclaimed.

During August 2006, we interviewed elders and photographed four aspects of village life: agriculture, healing, architecture and governance. What we discovered

&gt;&gt;

A Zapotec campesino.



Photo by Gabriela Zamorano.

about the process of knowledge loss was both disturbing and inspiring.

Subsistence farming is today an endangered vocation. In the wake of NAFTA, cheap U.S. corn flooded the government-subsidized CONASUPO stores, and local corn was undersold. As a consequence, for many families the temptation to stop farming is strong. They want cash and consider it easier to earn wages in the state capital (Oaxaca City), Mexico City or the U.S. rather than toil in the fields. Those who continue farming are sometimes ridiculed by their peers.

Yet the agricultural system that Talea's farmers have developed over centuries is sustainable, sophisticated and scientific in its own right. The villagers continue the ancestral practice of polycropping — cultivating corn, beans, squash and now coffee in the same field — which has important ecological advantages. This is the part of the world where corn originated, and seven distinct varieties of corn are cultivated in Talea alone. The farmers of the Rincón are performing a priceless service for humanity by serving as stewards of corn biodiversity, but valuable knowledge about farming, food and the local ecosystem is rapidly disappearing as the result of a virtual exodus of young Zapotecs. In the meantime, fertile land is being abandoned and along with it locally specific expertise — knowledge erased.

Another vocation in peril is that of the healer, or *curandera*. We spent an afternoon with a *curandera* of more than 50 years experience, who uses dozens of herbs collected from her garden, a lush patio that is a veritable pharmacopoeia. In addition to herbal teas and poultices, she uses suction “cupping” techniques similar to those used in Chinese medicine to treat a wide range of illnesses. Other healers use massage and acupressure.

We filmed the *curandera* treating a young woman suffering from *susto* (literally “fright” or trauma-induced stress) who had previously been misdiagnosed by a physician trained in Western medicine. (The physician's poor diagnosis led to the patient having a molar needlessly removed.) The corridor of the *curandera*'s adobe home served as the treatment room. She first listened intently as the patient described her symptoms (extreme anxiety, headaches, nausea, loss of appetite), then draped her body in a cloth and treated her with a *limpia* (or “cleansing”). The *curandera* began her treatment by dousing a bundle of herbs, including arnica, with alcohol, setting it alight, and rapidly whisking it over the patient's cloaked body. Within minutes of treatment, the patient appeared more relaxed.

Later, our videographer Kike Arnal made a trip to the local health clinic where he also filmed patients being treated. In one memorable scene the doctor — an outsider assigned to

work in Talea — speaks to the patient from behind a massive typewriter. The bureaucratic impulse contrasts starkly with the intensely personal treatment provided by the *curandera*.

Yet *curandismo* is in peril of disappearing. No young people in Talea are being apprenticed at the moment, and it is entirely possible that the handful of people currently practicing will be the village's last generation of healers — knowledge forgotten.

Not so long ago, Talea's buildings were made of local materials. Villagers made their homes using adobe bricks, fashioned from earth and straw and topped with ceramic tiles produced in a nearby village. They organized work parties (similar to barn-raising) called *gozonas* in which neighbors came together to complete the task.

In the early 1900s, they constructed a stately municipal palace and a massive church using large stones, bricks and mortar from a mixture of limestone and sand procured locally. Both structures were inspired by paintings, and the Taleans ingeniously adapted regional building materials in order to recreate foreign architectural styles. Village leaders completed these impressive works with obligatory communal work, known as the *tequio*. This indigenous labor system required each able-bodied man to provide several days of work each month with no pay (in lieu of paying taxes) to realize ambitious projects that would benefit the community of 2000 people.

Today, *gozona* and *tequio* are breaking down. Many Taleans told us that time is too important now, claiming that there is simply not enough time to organize work parties or to dedicate a day of service to public works. For many, time is money, and cash is probably more important (and prestigious) today than at any other time in Talea's history. Perhaps this is why cement block homes have become so popular in the village, even though they are poorly insulated and unstable in seismic zones. Concrete homes provide a conspicuous way of displaying the owner's wealth — and modernity.

On the other hand, some Taleans are holding on to architectural knowledge — reclaiming it — while creatively adopting new techniques borrowed from elsewhere. Among them is a man who received a college degree in Mexico City and returned to the village to raise his young family in a safer environment. He earns a comfortable income from his work at the community's credit union but is decidedly against a cement block home. Instead, he began building an adobe home that integrates local and “outside” knowledge and techniques in new ways. For example, his adobe bricks are much neater than traditional versions and thus less prone to cracking since an expert from a neighboring village shared a new technique: setting the bricks out to dry in the evening, so

continued on page 31 >>

that they expand slowly. Other techniques — such as applying lacquer to the adobe with a mixture of egg whites and cactus mucilage — were borrowed from architects in the city. The home is a wonderful example of architectural syncretism — knowledge gained and knowledge reclaimed.

Finally, village governance, the subject of a PBS film “Little Injustices,” is slowly losing its autonomous base. The *presidente*, once elected by the village to serve without pay is now a state-paid employee, and local democracy is suffering.

The pattern of governance in Talea is a combination of aboriginal, colonial and recent Mexican influences. Even today, all male citizens are

expected to serve periodically in various annual municipal positions which are ranked in a hierarchy. By ascending the hierarchy one assumes greater authority and responsibility. However, much of the traditional system has been dismantled, and the influence wielded by the villagers has waned. In the past, influential leaders known as *principales* presided over nightly meetings where issues pertaining to Talea’s collective well-being were discussed, including building the church and municipal palace.

We interviewed one of the elders, an 86-year-old man, who was considered a principal and had acted as an administrative, legislative and judicial advisor in village government. He told us that in the early 1970s, the position of principal was abolished. The nightly meetings were suppressed, and the village authorities no longer managed public works. State officials began to decide technical matters such as what and where to build.

He also noted that “progress” did not necessarily mean improvement. For example, the decision to cement over the paths in town has led to waste — rainwater now flows straight down to the river, bypassing the home gardens it once watered. The elder’s portrayal of events in Talea indicated that the process of coming to an agreement by sharing experience was lost now that the collective wisdom of the *principales* is no longer present — knowledge abolished.

Talea’s disappearing knowledge isn’t just a Zapotec problem: it’s a global problem. Throughout the world,



Photo by Gabriela Zamorano.

Talea’s municipal palace, built using traditional methods.

local knowledge developed over centuries — a priceless intellectual treasure trove — is withering away. It is as if, within a generation, the world’s greatest libraries were being destroyed. In the words of biologist Dr. David Ehrenfeld, “our concept of progress prevents us from realizing that skills and knowledge can simply vanish from the world.” Unless the process is reversed, we may be faced with the enormous (and perhaps impossible) task of reconstructing it to secure the future. Civilizing, modernizing, developing and democratizing missions need rethinking.

Laura Nader is Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. She is author of *Harmony Ideology: Justice and Control in a Zapotec Mountain Village*. She spoke for CLAS on October 22, 2007.

Roberto J. González is Associate Professor in the Department of Anthropology at San José State University. He is author of *Zapotec Science: Farming and Food in the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca*.