

Yelapa History Project

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An account based on research at the Bancroft Library, University of California at Berkeley, in 1991 and 2005.

Yelapa lies on the southern shore of the Bay of Banderas, on the west coast of Mexico in the state of Jalisco. It is part of a much larger indigenous community (comunidad indigena, in Spanish), made up of about 25,000 square hectares, including several other coastal and mountain villages. It is a unique community—one of the few remaining on Earth where the original inhabitants still reside on, own and control their own lands. This brief summary gives a general overview of the area and recounts what we know of the earliest beginnings of Yelapa.

Overview:

This area is in what is geologically known as the Southern Escarpment, one of Mexico's several immense mountain ranges dividing and defining the country's regions. The land is densely foliated from the sea to the peaks, boasting a wide range of tropical flowering plants and trees, truly a nature lover's delight. This is a tropical dry broadleaf forest, where the wet or rainy season lasts to nearly half the year, leaving the land gradually drying in the winter and the spring.

This particular region of Mexico was cited by the magazine Cultural Survival as one of the richest and most valuable bioregions in the world: "The aggregate ecoregion unit encompassed by Mexican dry forests is particularly noteworthy ...This 'ecosystem' not only supports a relatively high indigenous cultural diversity (about 30 distinct groups) ... it also represents one of the world's oldest important repositories of genetic resources. Its forest tree genetic resources rival that of any topical moist forest region. Even more significantly, its crop plant genetic resources, which include wild relatives of maize, cotton, peppers, and squash, are the basis of some of the world's most valuable commercial crops." (1) Indeed, according to this source, this area of Mexico is second only to the Amazon rain basin in terms of biodiversity and numbers of indigenous communities.

Yelapa lies on the bay about 15 miles southwest of Puerto Vallarta. The El Tuito River empties into the sea here, as well as another small mountain tributary. Yelapa's name is said to be an old Indian one meaning "where two rivers meet the sea." About 1,400 Mexicans live here, spreading back from the seaside village into the Tuito river valley. The elders say that Yelapa was initially settled by four families, who came down the mountain from the parent village of Chacala, in the mountains above Yelapa. Today these close ties still hold: almost everyone is multiply related and has family in Chacala. In addition to these indigenous residents, about 30 persons from other places, mostly the USA and Canada, have settled full-time in Yelapa. Another hundred or so foreigners come back every year for extended stays, and anywhere from a handful to several hundred tourists may also be on hand, depending on the time of year.

As a comunidad indigena, this area shares, with a handful of others in Mexico, a unique status: it is a land grant or reservation, which is legally set aside and protected for the indigenous people who are recognized as having always lived there. The land is held collectively, by the community as a whole. There is no private ownership of land by

anyone, even its indigenous residents, though it is possible for families to occupy and claim land by using or cultivating it, and then by buying and selling it. Outsiders, however, may not buy or claim any land here at all. This unique place, therefore, is one to support and enjoy rather than to claim and own.

The formal governing council for the community is in Chacala, the original township. Chacala is reachable by car or bus on the steeply climbing inland highway, leaving Puerto Vallarta from the mouth of the Tomatlan River, which marks the end-point of the area's highly developed tourist industry. The road continues inland to El Tuito, the center of the municipio or the county seat, and finally on a smaller, rougher road off the highway to Chacala. Yelapa residents more typically travel to Chacala up a dirt road from above the Yelapa cemetery, which is passable by vehicle only in the dry season, or by trail, on foot or on horseback at other times. The comunidad includes the villages and settlements of Yelapa, Las Animas, Quimixto, Pizota, Playa de Caballo, Majahuitas, Caletas, Caletitas, Colimiya, Chacala, Moscotita, El Algodon, and Tecuani.

The high mountains behind Yelapa have not been crossed by roads, so the only ways to get here are to come by boat from a nearby town, such as Puerto Vallarta, to walk or ride a horse or mule on the long, rocky coastal route, or to come down on the trail or dirt road from Chacala. There are no roads per se in Yelapa. Some trails are now paved with cobblestones, but most remain as natural paths.

Modern conveniences are very recent. Electricity and phones arrived at the pueblo in 2001. Water is carried to the village from the nearby waterways through pipes or plastic tubing for inside plumbing. There is no water delivery system, though vigorous planning for such a system typically happens every dry season. This means that water is not continuously available to all households. In the dry season, in May and June in particular, some areas can be dry for extensive periods. There is no sewer system either, with sanitation being supplied by septic tanks.

All of this means that the most basic tasks of living - walking, cleaning, carrying and building, and certainly bringing needed items in - can quickly acquire a new meaning and importance here in Yelapa. For outsiders it's a unique opportunity to live more simply and holistically. Yelapa can often seem to visitors like an island outside of time and space. Living more simply contributes to the experience.

Early History:

It has been said the whole of Mexico is one vast archaeological dig. This is certainly apparent to the visitor of the Aztec pyramids, the ancient sites of Monte Alban and Mitla, and the Mayan ruins in Yucatan. Yelapa's region has had, by comparison, only a small amount of excavation. Isabel Kelley (1945), however, has documented a rich pre-conquest civilization in the Autlan area, just south and east of the comunidad. Kelley stated, "Both archaeological and historical data indicate that the Autlan area was a zone of high culture. At the time of the conquest, the population was about as dense as it is today; sedentary village life was based upon agriculture; irrigation was practiced; there were markets; well water was drunk in areas where springs or perennial streams were wanting; clothing was of cotton and maguey; ceramic and presumably other arts were well developed." (2)

The first recorded contact with outsiders was a military party led by Francisco Cortes, cousin to Hernan Cortes, the famous conqueror of Mexico. In 1524 Cortes led a party from Colima north through Autlan as far as Tepic, returning the next year down the coast to the

Bay of Banderas, home of the comunidad and present day Puerto Vallarta. We have diary accounts by the party's cleric, Father Tello, of this hot and weary army bludgeoning their way through the valley, finally capturing about 100 Indians for guides on their climb into what Tello, called "La Provincia de Los Frailes," the coastal and mountain lands culminating in Cabo Corrientes. (3)

As they made their weary way into the mountains near what today is El Tuito, their journey took on another tone. They were met by a large welcoming group of friendly natives. Tello describes them as dressed in elaborate feathered headdresses and bearing large crosses made of white wood and cane, all of which he writes, "... was truly much to see." (This vision of the feathered headdresses lent the group the name Los Coronados, or the crowned ones, a name that often appears in the historical literature afterwards and which was passed down and is still remembered by some of the elders in the community.)

The natives pleaded with Cortes to remove his army from their lands, stating that they were a peace loving people wishing only friendly relations. Cortes was apparently taken aback by this overture of friendship. He subsequently laid down his arms and took advantage of their hospitality. The historical accounts speak of feasting and dancing and the Spaniard's praise of this tranquil and happy place. He then left the area untouched and free, thus sparing this group of Indians the fate of enslavement that fell to their compatriots all over Mexico. (4)

In 1527, Cortes returned to El Tuito and called the inhabitants together at the newly built church of El Torito (Santa Cruz de Los Ramos) to celebrate its first mass. He then established initial contact with two other villages some distance from the church, Tomatlan and Piloto. (5) These early contacts were very important for the comunidad, as they helped to provide the legal basis later for the natives' obtaining official recognition from the King of Spain of their right to their own lands.

In 1581, King Philip II of Spain did indeed formally grant the property rights of this territory to the people of Yelapa and their community. This remarkable early history is described by elder and former President of the community, Espiridion Ramos:

The document is dated in 1581. The Crown concedes the land to the indigenous community of Chacala. This document defines the land as reaching from one mountain to another mountain with a river passing in the middle. This document was accompanied by another document that referred to the city of Amula, today the city of Guzman. The indigenous people later bought the land from the Crown with money believed to have come from the mining that supported the 12,000 inhabitants of Chacala, and the document was safeguarded with a family in Chacala ... The document defined the 25,000 hectares of the community and, starting in 1729, the community, little by little, acquired additional land in which is now found Chacala, the headquarters of the community, Yelapa, Quimixto, Las Animas, and, to the south, Pizota, Mascota, and El Algodon.... (6)

It is this document that grants to this community the special status of comunidad indigena, protected in the Mexican Constitution of 1910. It stipulates that this land has always belonged collectively to these people and that they have the right to continue to independently own and occupy it.

Less is documented about the comunidad for the next 200 years, perhaps providentially, as this is the time of the bloody enslavement of native Mexicans and theft of their lands. This shameful and violent activity continued throughout the Colonial period, in Maximilian's brief reign in the mid 1800's, in the more supportive administration of Indian leader Benito Juarez, and certainly and perhaps at its worst, in the land-grabbing decades of Mexican

Independence from the time Diaz up until the great revolution of 1910. (7) Throughout this period, happily, the Comunidad de Chacala remained independent.

The historical geographer Peter Gerhard has tracked this area as a part of the larger region of Purificacion in Cabo Corrientes. According to Gerhard, much of this land was briefly granted to a Spaniard, Ortiz de Zuniga, in the late 1500's. This status generally meant for the native people that though they could remain on indigenous lands, they were subjects of and owed regular tributes in grain or other resources to their landlord. After 1608 he describes it as subject only to the Spanish Crown. (8) Old timers in the community recall this temporary change of status. They speak of a time in which their lands were granted to someone else, and they were supposed to pay tribute. They say, however, that their forebearers largely ignored this obligation. Later, as elder Ramos described above, precious metals from mines in their own lands were used to buy back some of the lands that had been claimed earlier by outsiders. (9)

Peter Gerhard's study of the fate of these villages shows that whatever their legal status, they remained free and largely ignored during the colonial period. He has speculated that pirate raids of trading routes off the Pacific Coast of Mexico may have partially accounted for the fact that the Spaniards left this extensive area virtually undisturbed for the next two centuries. Another reason might be its natives' reputation for resistance and rebellions. Indeed, it became a safe haven for many, such as African slaves escaping from their cruel fates in the low-land fields. (10)

The comunidad indigena of Yelapa today enjoys the protection of the Mexican Constitution in Article 27. The fight for land continues, however as Mexico struggles to enter the modern technological marketplace. It's an uphill path, moreover, in this faltering, debt ridden economy, where about two thirds of the people still live in small rural villages, where at least that number feed themselves through subsistence agriculture, and where you are as likely to see a wooden plow behind a mule as any kind of mechanized farming device.

Here in Yelapa this past and present merge. Residents live as they have for centuries on lands they hold in common. Yet just a short boat ride away is Puerto Vallarta, nearly totally claimed and developed by foreign, corporate interests. Can Yelapa remain a true collective trust, or will its own inhabitants choose rather to sell or lease their lands to foreign developers, as did some of their indigenous neighbors in Puerto Vallarta just a few short decades ago? Will the beleaguered Mexican government appropriate this land for development without even giving its people a say? These struggles are those of indigenous peoples the world over, and the outcomes bear great import for us all.

As visitors here, we can simply enjoy as honored guests this precious land. We need, however, to appreciate its unique context, for the tranquility and sense of community arise out of the whole cloth. Yelapa remains a testament to a long, proud struggle of a native people who have, at least till now, been able to hold their land.

Notes:

- 1) Wilcox, Bruce A. and Duin, Kristin N., "Indigenous Cultural and Biological Diversity," in *Cultural Survival Quarterly*, Winter, 1995, p. 53.
- 2) Kelley, Isabel. *Ibero-Americana*: 26. *The Archeology of the Autlan Zone*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945, p. 79.
- 3) A good summary of the historical and archival first-hand accounts of these contacts appears in English in Peter Gerhard's *The Northern Frontier of New Spain*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982. My contextual understanding of the entire colonial epoch in Yelapa is based on his work here. By means of Gerhard's citations and references, and because of the excellent resources in the Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, I was also able to read first-hand accounts of this journey in *Cronica Miscelanea de la Sancta Provincia de Xalisco por Fray-Antonio Tello*. Vol. 1, Guadalajara: September 16, 1730. This is supposedly taken from an original clerical diary, dating from 1653. The observations in this diary are confirmed in a documentary of the history of the Catholic Church in El Tuito, in C. Brambila's *Opispado de Autlan*, October 31, 1951.
- 4) *Ibid.*, p. 67; Brambila, *op.cit.*, pp. 205-206.
- 5) Tello, *op.cit.*, p. 67; Brambila, *op.cit.*, pp. 206-207.
- 6) Interview by Charlie Chicharra with Espiridion Joya Ramos, in *Hola Amigo*, a locally published newspaper of the ex-patriot community, Yelapa.
- 7) Good histories of Mexico from the perspectives of its native peoples and their lands are: Helen Phipps, *Some Aspects of the Agrarian Question in Mexico*, Austin, Texas: University of Texas Bulletin, No. 2515, April 15, 1925; George McCutchen McBride, *The Land Systems of Mexico*, New York: American Geographical Society, Research Series No. 12, 1923; Eyles Simpson, *The Ejido, Mexico's Way Out*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937; Nathan L. Whetten, *Rural Mexico*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948.
- 8) Gerhard, Peter, *A Guide to the Historical Geography of New Spain*, Cambridge: University Press, 1972, p. 119.
- 9) Ramos interview, *op.cit.*
- 10) Gerhard, Peter, *Pirates of the West Coast of New Spain: 1575-1741*, Glendale, CA: The Arthur A. Clark Co., 1960, pp. 48-49 and pp. 117-121.