

Cave Rituals in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Many caves in Oaxaca, Mexico, have archaeological remains indicating that caves were important in ancient times. Five major archaeological caves are known to have had abundant remains including burials and probable ritual offerings. The information is, nevertheless, sparse because these cave sites are located in only two ethnic regions (Figure 1). Pre-Hispanic cave use is currently known in Oaxaca from the Cueva de Ejutla burial site in the Mixtec/Cuicatec region (Moser 1975) and Cueva Cheve in the Cuicatec highlands (Steele and Snaveley 1997), and the Mazatec caves of Blade Cave (Steele 1987), Cueva de Tenango (Winter 1984) and Las Ruinas Cave and the related caves of the Cerro Rabon (Hapka and Rouvinez 1997). There is, however, rich ethnographic and historical data supporting the implication that caves have been and continue to be important locales in the belief systems of the native people of Oaxaca. This summary of what is known about Oaxacan cave use will be related in terms of cultural beliefs about supernatural spirits, natural forces and social aspects. A review of what is known from Oaxacan ethnohistoric and ethnographic cave use may help explain what the artifacts and their context mean.

Supernatural spirits:

Spirits are associated with caves. Caves, springs, and other openings of the earth's surface were related to the underworld (Spores 1967:96-97). The interior of the earth is a specific location of the supernaturals (De la Fuente 1949:265). The main deity of the earliest people at Monte Alban was the jaguar-baby-faced god of rain and lightning who lived in a cave. Jaguar was the ancestor for the Zapotec rain-lightning god Coicyo (Burgoa 1934: Ch.xxviii, qdt. in Covarrubias 1946:78-79; Covarrubias 1946:153,181-183). Mitla Zapotecs deities include the "owners" of the caves (Parsons 1936: 210, 214-215, 509-510). The Mixe believe that cave spirits visit people in the night, and that sacrificial offerings must be performed so that the spirits will return to the caves (Lipp 1991:40). Their translation of church is the same term for cave shrines where sacrifices are made to the memory of the pre-Christian spirits (Beals 1973:64). In the Cuicatec region, most beliefs focus on a mystical figure called Senor del Cerro who dwells in Cerro Cheve. Curers souls are said to go to there (Weitlaner 1969:444-446). This is the location of Cueva Cheve. The Mazatecs believe

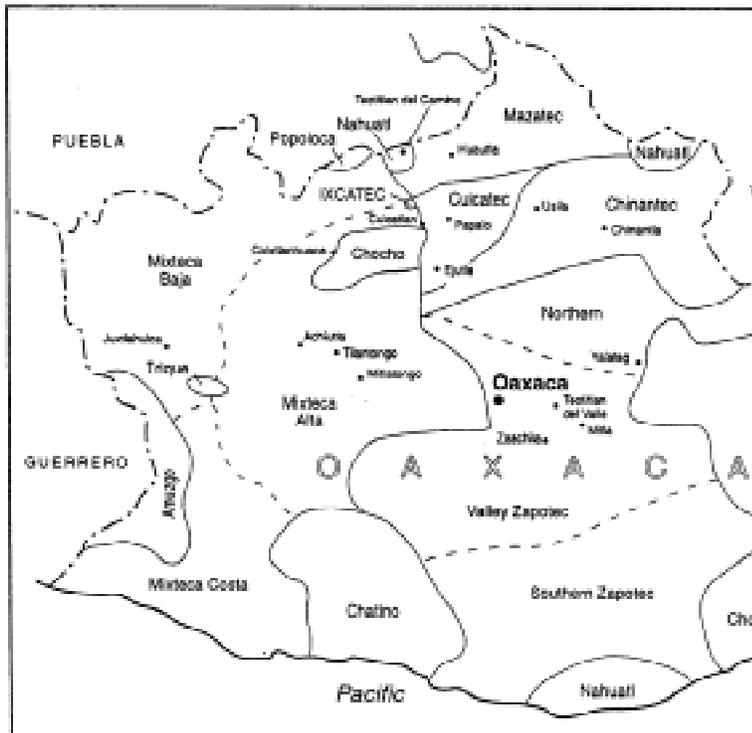


Figure 1. Proximity Map

in dwarfs, the chikusi, who live in the caves (Johnson 1939:133). The Mazatecs also fear the Masters of the Earth, who live underground (Johnson 1939:136-137). The Chontal believe that the Crow who discovered maize lives in a cave (Carrasco 1960:110). The Mixtecs have legends of Passion and of the Devil who abide in caves (Avendano and Alexander 1970:169,172, Spores 1984:152-153).

Oaxacan folklore tells how the idol world came into existence, and of idols having parties in caves (Radin 1917:29-30). Idols have been placed in caves to serve ritual purposes (Bevan 1938:65; Villa Rojas 1956:33). An effigy was fashioned, seemingly as a cave explorer, and placed in the entrance to Cueva Cheve as work was in progress in 1989. Offerings of coins, beer and liquor in corn cob vials, and cigarettes accompanied the effigy. Miniatures have been found in caves (Johnson Irmgard Weitlaner 1967:179-190; Parson 1925:44). Parsons described fetishes called prayer-images made by the Zapotecs and placed in caves (1936:299). There may be a problem, however, with distinguishing in folklore among idols and effigies, and archaeological artifacts such as figurines, funerary urns and petroglyphs (Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:221-223). Archaeological artifacts and anything of the ancients found in caves are respected by the local people. It is believed that whoever touches or takes away these things of the ancient will have trouble with the rain deities or they will die (Lipp 1991:49; Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:269). Nevertheless, looting does occur.

Money rituals and myths are associated with caves in Oaxaca. Some native groups believe that wealth in various forms can be acquired from within them. The Zapotec think this true (De la Fuente 1949:265-266, 305; Parsons 1936:294, 296-297, 328, 402, 420-421, 448). The notion of much from little may be the reason the Zapotecs place miniatures in the caves (Parsons 1936:509). That wealth can be gained from venturing into caves is believed by the Mixtecs (Byland and Pohl 1994:87, 203). In the Mixe region, there is a large body of tales concerning the acquisition of money and cattle from divinities within caves (Lipp 1991:47-48; Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:110-111, 120-121, 123-125, 262-267; Starr 1900:156).

Natural Forces:

Rain, drought and agricultural rituals and myths, lightning and water-serpents, and New Year's ceremonies are all interrelated with caves to some Oaxacan indigenous groups. On certain days in the moist tropics, clouds emit from cave entrances due to climatic factors which include barometric changes. This, no doubt, led to the belief which many still hold that weather originates from within the cavern; hence, the rain comes from the cave. They associate the caves with the origin of rain, but more than that with their crops growing, fertility, prosperity and power. The belief is held, therefore, among certain groups that caves are the home of various rain deities.

In order to make rain, the Mazatec specialist will

enter a cave, praying. As he enters the cave, it thunders because the spirits are angry. It is said that the thunder is the result of little old men. The Mazatec sprinkles water so it will rain (Johnson 1939:136-137). The most important Mixtec ritual is, also, directed toward the invocation of rain (Ravicz and Romney 1969:373, 394). The Mixe, too, associate rain with caves (Beals 1973:68, 90, 94; Hoogshagen 1966:316; Lipp 1991:49). The Zapotecs, again, believe that in the earth are caves which furnish the rain (De la Fuente 1949:265-266). Zapotec oral tradition tells a variety of stories involving Lightning, Water Serpent, and Thunder who all live in caves (Parsons 1936:212, 221, 224, 295, 328-330, 332, 334). Interchangeably called "Rayo", the implication may be that they are all manifestations of Rain. Sometimes, however, Lightning and the Serpent are said to fight with each other (Beals 1935:189-190). The Mixe tell stories about serpents in caves and rayos protecting the pueblos (Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:159-160, 224, 267-268). The Chinantla believe that the rayos are spirits of persons who live caves. When clouds appear, spirits enter them and cause the thunder (Weitlaner 1977:94, 100). Among the Ichcatec myths, the "dios de la lluvia" has been given offerings of food, fowl, flowers, and incense which would be buried underground. Next day they say it would rain, and a white cloud would appear at dawn. Goblins and the "owners" of the place are well known. This is said, however, to be in the past (Hoppe and Weitlaner 1969:503).

Nowhere is it more apparent that the new rain is related to the new year than in the Mixtec region when people gather to await the first cloud of the New Year (Monaghan 1995:105). Mixtecs and Zapotecs at Spanish contact offered human sacrifices on the eve of the first day of the new year (Spores 1965:977). Mitla Zapotecs currently kill turkeys which they take to the caves on New Year's Eve. A part they leave, and a part they take back to their houses to eat. If the pilgrims hear thunder at the time of their visit to the cave, the occasion is particularly auspicious. Lightning is, clearly, not forgotten on New Year's Eve (Parsons 1936:238). The Mixe, on New Year's Day, hold sacrificial rites and a feast inside a cave on Granary Mountain (Lipp 1991:48, 144-145). They have a story about a magical cave that may be open only on New Year's Day (Miller and Villa Rojas: 1956:120).

Among the Zapotec during the early centuries of Catholicism, as well as in pre-Hispanic times, caves were places of cult, particularly caves with pools (Parsons 1936:214). Called, rain shrines in the Mixtec region today these caves frequently contain pools of fresh, pure water. Rain shrines are damp inside, even at the height of the dry season. People say that the drops of water that fall from the ceiling of the cave are "raindrops" (Monaghan 1995:107). Water pools or streams are found in the archaeological caves in association with artifacts in Blade Cave (Steele 1987:54, 59, 64, 68, 73, 76, 78, 80, 88), and Cueva de Tenango (Winter 1984: Part 1) in the Mazatec region, and in the Cuicatec Cueva Cheve (Steele and Snively 1997:26, 27).

Manually altered stalagmites have been worshiped as idols in association with rain deities, probably because of their formation from drip water (Steele 1987:104). Keeping in mind that ethnohistoric writers had perspectives or “agendas” which led them to interpret events in particular ways, sometimes exaggerating and distorting what the native peoples were actually doing, the seventeenth-century Dominican chronicler Francisco de Burgoa reported an incident which occurred between a priest, named Father Jeronimo, and Oaxacan caciques. He wrote that Father Jeronimo was talking about the rains, and how the Lord would withhold them because of sin, to enforce on the native population his belief of the need to come to the Lord every day to ask for daily bread. A cacique answered, “My father, this may well happen in other pueblos, but here we have a very obliging god of the rains and we try to serve him in all that he asks of us, and for that he usually blesses us with sufficient water and extra seeds for our sustenance.” When the priest asked him, “Where do you have this god?”, the chief replied that his temple was in a great cave. The priest goes into the cave and destroys everything, bashing up the place, breaking the idols made from altered stalagmites, while all the people wait expecting the gods to kill him. In the end they see the light and falseness of their idols, and the priest converts them (Burgoa 1934b:478-481). A second story relates virtually the same actions on the part of a priest named Father Benito Hernandez (Burgoa 1934a Tomo I:318). Such idols were other caves (Burgoa 1934a Tomo II:122). In 1652 four Mixtec men were accused of having entered a cave near their community center to engage in traditional idolatrous acts. One man was said to have gone into the cave in the company of the other natives with wax candles, copal incense, and fire and to have delivered a prayer for rain before a carved-stone idol, which would likely be a stalagmite (Spores 1984:152-153).

One of the few items of colonial information on the Chocho, relates that Father Geronimo Abrego, by a show of goodwill, persuaded the people to point out to him the place where they practiced their idolatries in a cave. It was a stalactite which they regarded as a deity. By destroying the stalactite, he accomplished the definitive evangelization of the Chocho (Hoppe and Weitlaner 1969:506). Perhaps to accommodate the Catholic priests, in 1889, in the Mixe region on New Year’s Day, people would go into a cave and venerate two stalagmites they considered miraculously to be Saint Peter and Saint Paul. Nevertheless, these Mixes would bring tamales and turkeys, leaving the heads there and spattering the blood around the stones (Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:211).

Caves are still considered sacred places throughout the Mixteca Alta. Inside one cave there is a stalagmite called the Archbishop, which is an object of veneration (Byland and Pohl 1994:202-203). In Blade Cave, a prominent altered stalagmite has vessels placed below it (Figure 2) as though it were an object of worship (Steele 1987:81, 86, 88).

A Mixtec marriage ritual involves elders making offerings in a cave before a stalagmite or carved stone representing Rain. Broken stalagmites are said to represent Rain and have the inherent power to help make a plentiful harvest, protect the settlement, and bring rain. After the marriage, stalagmites which represent the bride and groom are taken from the cave and set up outside the dwelling of those just married (Ravicz and Romney 1969:394).

In Blade Cave, broken speleothems have also been situated to be used ritually (Steele 1987:60, 64, 86). In Las Ruinas Cave, the lithophone gallery has a group of stalagmites, stalactites, columns and draperies, among which about ten have percussion wear on one or several sides. Smaller stalagmites are scattered broken on the ground, appearing to have been ceremonially hit on the speleothems to produce a resonance (Hapka and Rouvinez 1997:in press). Music produced in this manner might have been used in rain related rituals.

Social Aspects:

Caves have socio-political importance. Ancestral cultural heroes emerging from caves is a common belief among Oaxacan groups. Mention of caves in the codices include pictorial representations of the Yaha Yahui priests, a special kind of hechiceros or wizards, flying through the air in and out of caves (Byland and Pohl 1994:83-84, 89, 168; Pohl 1994:47, 49, 50, 51). The Mixe pride themselves on their descent from the legendary Condoy who hatched from an egg found in a cave (also spelled Kondoy) (Covarrubias 1946:51; Hoogshagen 1966:316; Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:105, 108, 203). The Chontal tell a similar legend about Three Hummingbird (Carrasco 1960:113). The notion of subterranean passages, which lead out to far distances and magical destinations is characteristic of Oaxacan cave lore. These passages are often said to be traversed by their cultural heroes (Covarrubias 1946:188; Byland and Pohl 1994:90; Miller and Villa Rojas 1956:203; Parsons 1936:220-221, 294).

Caves are not only the locales for the emergence of the founders of dynasties and cultural heroes, but may also be affiliated with the people from a primordial time. Among certain Oaxacan indigenous groups there exists the belief that the ancestors of their race had risen from the inner depths of the earth to the light of the sun. Sacred caves were the realm of the forefathers, their ancient home (Byland and Pohl 1994:119; Furst 1986:57-58; Lipp 1991:48; Monaghan 1995:208-212; Parsons 1936:220-221, 444-445, 509-510; Seler 1904:247). The Mazatec believe that one type of Time itself, the time of men, was a product of the underworld (Portal 1986:40).

Caves have glyphic significance in Mixtec place names (Byland and Pohl 1994:81-85). The Mixtec used real places in a real landscape to portray in their glyphs places of actual landforms visible to an observer located in



Figure 2. Stalagmites have been venerated as objects of worship.

a fixed position. Landscape is physical geography but it is also the cultural perception of that physical content, the description of the particular formation of the earth which holds relevance for its resident population (Pohl and Byland 1990:113, 115, 119, 122, 126). The codices portray the ancestors of principal Mixtec dynasties as having emerged from the earth. Thus, the Mixtec lords had fixed their role as mediators with the supernatural. By being literally descended from specific parts of the land they had claim to it beyond the rules of inheritance of property during the Postclassic (Pohl and Byland 1990:116). In Mixtec place names the word *cavua* has the geographical meaning of cave (Smith 1973:47). Land claims were also an important aspect of the colonial *lienzos*, and caves were also used on these as locators (Paramenter 1982:2-3, 20).

The supernatural was highly political for the Mixtec rulers because there was a focus on the deified ancestors of the main dynasties. While the rulers supervised the activities of the living, however, they also presided over the cave cult of the dead (Byland and Pohl 1994:168, 202). An important aspect of Mixtec religious life was not only the worship of ancestors, but also the veneration of the dead themselves (Pohl 1994:47, 118). Not only did dynastic founders emerge from the earth through caves, they were returned there after death (Byland and Pohl 1994:201). It was a custom among the Mixtecs, as well as the Zapotecs, Mazatecs, Cuicatecs, and the Mixes, to bury their dead chiefs and nobles

in caves (Burgoa 1674, chap. 29, qtd. in Seler 1904:248; Burgoa 1934 Tomo I: 338-339, 372 qtd. in Pohl 1994:47; Byland and Pohl 1994:203; Cline 1966:286; Covarrubias 1946:188; Dahlgren 1966:295, qtd. in Moser 1976:26; Antonio de Herrera y Tordesillas 1726: dec. 3, lib. 3, chap. 13, qtd. in Spores 1967:24; Moser 1976:26; Seler 1904:247). Human remains have been found in all of the archaeological caves (Hapka and Rouvinez 1997:in press; Steele 1987:54, 59, 76-78; Steele and Snavely 1997:29; Moser 1975:30, 1976:23, 1983:270; Winter 1984:Part 2).

Deified Mixtec rulers were at times mummified in caves. Possibly, these mummies were visited as oracles (Byland and Pohl 1994:87-88, 169, 201-202, 205-206). Caves as oracles were, also, visited by other indigenous Oaxacan groups. The most important sanctuary, for instance, in the Zapotec region was the residence of their great prophet who was treated by the Zapotec kings, as Burgoa relates, with such submissive veneration and regarded as being so closely connected with the gods, being the direct distributor of their gracious gifts, as well as their punishments, that the kings turned to him in all matters and in every need, and carried out his commands with the strictest obedience, even at the cost of their blood and their lives (Seler 1904:247).

Human sacrifice was practiced among certain native cultures of Oaxaca in pre-Hispanic times, and during the period of early contact with Europeans from 1519 to early 1522 (Acuna 1984:238 qtd. in Pohl 1994:47; Burgoa

1934 Tomo I: 318; Covarrubias 1946:189; Spores 1965:977; Jimenez-Moreno, *Codice de Yanhuitlan* 1940:38-39, AGN Inquisicion: 37, Caso 1942, and Dahlgren 1954 qdt. in Spores 1965:982). One suggestion from codices is that the great ruler 8 Deer may have been either murdered or sacrificed in the cave in the Cavau Colorado in A.D. 1115 (Byland and Pohl 1994:169). The Zapotec ritual consisted in making offerings of food, flowers, jade, ceramic vessels, incense, and the blood from small animals and human beings, who bled themselves (Covarrubias 1946: 189). Vessels are recorded for all five of the archaeological sites (Hapka and Rouvinez:1997 in press, Steele 1987:59-76, 80-92; Steele and Snavelly 1997:27-31; Moser 1976:25; Winter 1984:Part 2). Jade was found in Cueva de Ejutla (Moser: 1976:24), Cueva Cheve (Steele and Snavelly 1997:27, 29, 31), Blade Cave (Steele 1987:60, 64, 68, 81, 86, 88-89, 92), and Cueva de Tenango (Winter 1984:Part 2). Obsidian blades presumed to have been used in blood letting have been recorded for Cueva de Ejutla (Moser 1983:270), Cueva Cheve (Steele and Snavelly 1997:27, 30), Blade Cave (Steele 1987:64, 86, 91), and Cueva de Tenango (Winter 1984:Part 2).

Contemporarily, blood rituals continue to be practiced in the caves in Oaxaca. Commonly found among the modern evidence of ritual activity in caves, as witnessed by the author on numerous occasions in the Mazatec and Cuicatec caves, are the remains of animal sacrifices involving chickens and turkeys. In addition to the Mazatec (Johnson 1939:133; Weitlaner and Hoppe 1969:520), and

the Cuicatec rituals (Holland and Weitlaner 1960:392; Steele and Snavelly 1997:26; Weitlaner 1969:445), such rituals in caves have been reported in the Mixe (Beals 1973: 87-90, 93-94; Hoogshagen 1966:314; Lipp 1991:48-49, 144-145), the Mixtec (Ravicz and Romney 1969:373, 399), Tepehaus and Tonoacs (Starr 1908:256-257) and in the Zapotec regions (Beals 1935:189-190, Parsons 1936: 43, 225, 238, 294, 411, 508).

In addition to chicken and turkey sacrifices, the Trique sacrifice a sheep or goat, and leave flowers and incense in caves as offerings (Nadar 1969:413). Dog sacrifices have also occur in the Mixe and Zapotec regions (De La Fuente 1949:306). Dog mandibles are reported from the Mazatec Blade Cave (Steele 1987:64, 68), and Cueva de Ejutla (Moser 1975:30, 1976:23). A femur of possibly a deer was found Cueva de Tenango (Winter 1984:Part 3).

Other rituals involve the use of maize, flowers, pine cones, candles and no sacrifices. At least, none are reported (Beals 1945:88, 89, 90-91, 93; Parsons 1936:286, 389).

Specific archaeological evidence, including human remains, obsidian blades, vessels, jade and manually altered stalagmites, found in the five known Oaxacan cave sites likely represent the performance of rituals. What rituals were performed is not known. More sites throughout Oaxaca need to be discovered and investigated. Based on a review of the ethnohistoric and ethnographic data, however, caves have been and continue to function as salient features in the belief systems of the native people of Oaxaca.

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