

ETHNIC FOLKWAYS RECORDS FE 4358



Sacred Guitar & Violin Music of the Modern Aztecs

Recorded and annotated by Paul Provost and Alan R. Sandstrom



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SIDE 1

1. Xochipitsauak 5:29
2. Sacred Music 8:34
entering house 1:25
setting the altar 2:00
ritual begins 1:38
offering is consecrated 2:26
preparing to leave house 1:45
3. Dance of the Tlamatiketl 2:41

SIDE 2

Ayakachmitotia-rattle dances

1. Nopalli 3:58
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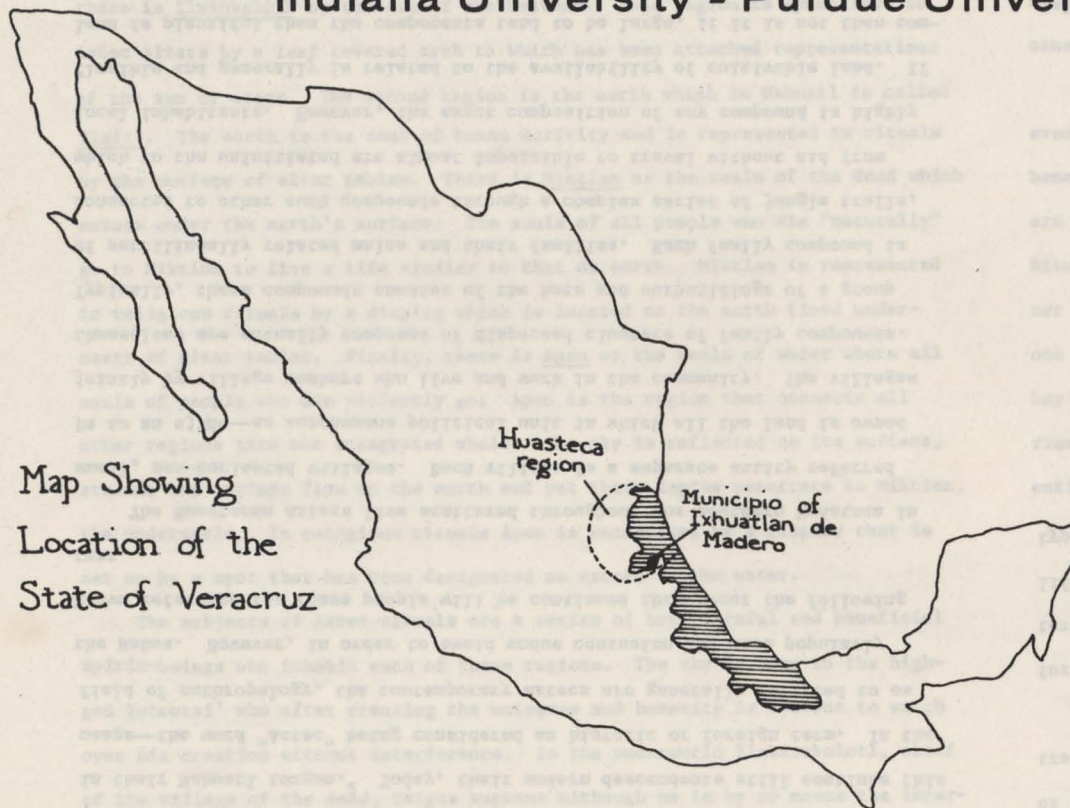
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Sacred Guitar & Violin Music of the Modern Aztecs

Recordings, Notes and Photographs by Paul Jean Provost and Alan R. Sandstrom,
Indiana University - Purdue University at Fort Wayne, Indiana¹



Map Showing
Location of the
State of Veracruz

Introduction

The Aztecs are perhaps one of the most widely known Indian groups associated with Mexico. Undoubtedly, this stems from the popular fascination with the many well-known historical accounts of their culture at the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 16th century. However, today the Aztecs are also one of Mexico's largest Indian groups, numbering over 1,000,000, and they are spread over many parts of contemporary Mexico. This wide geographical spread is the result of the political and military conditions that were at play in Pre-Columbian Mexico. At the time of the landing of Hernan Cortes

in 1519, the Aztec Empire was at its zenith. Its armies were spreading Aztec influence and control over most of central and coastal Mexico. As a part of this expansion, the Aztecs commonly established garrisoned settlements in newly conquered regions in order to maintain their political suzerainty.

One area that received such attention was the southern and southwestern fringe of the Huasteca--an ancient and independent kingdom in eastern Mexico located along the Gulf of Mexico near the mouth of the Panuco River. These garrison settlements not only maintained Aztec control but also spread the influence of Aztec culture. However, once the Aztec state was truncated with the collapse of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, these communities became isolated settlements living in the region they had previously garrisoned. Briefly, this accounts for the presence of the modern day descendants of the ancient Aztecs in the southern fringe of the Huasteca proper; and it is among these people that the authors made the present recordings during 1972-1973 in the Village of Puyecaco, Municipio of Ixhuatlan de Madero, Veracruz.

The Huasteca

The Huasteca is a multi-ethnic area, for besides the modern Aztecs, the region is also inhabited by a number of other, diverse Indian groups. These are: the Huastecs (the people for whom this region was named), the Otomi and the Tepehua Indians. The Huasteca has long had a reputation for being a remote and isolated area. This reputation is well deserved and as testimony to this fact it could be pointed out that today the southern Huasteca has only one dirt road that penetrates the region. Most travel, therefore, must be done either on horseback or on foot--especially so in the rainy season when the road and trails become impassible quagmires of mud. This is accountable by the region's

geography for it is located well within the rolling, undulating foothills of the great Sierra Madre Oriental Mountain range. Ecologically, the area is classified as a tropical forest and has the rich flora and fauna that is associated with such a geographical zone.

The Modern Aztec

Before proceeding to describe the modern day Aztec and their sacred and ceremonial music, it should be of interest to note that while the name "Aztec" has widespread usage in popular and professional literature, historically the Aztecs themselves never used the term but rather called themselves the "Mexica" in their Nahuatl tongue.² Today, their modern descendants still continue this usage--the word "Aztec" being considered an historic or foreign term. In the field of anthropology, the contemporary Aztecs are generally referred to as the Nahuatl. However, in order to avoid undue confusion the more popularly known reference for these people will be continued throughout the following text.

The Huastecan Aztecs live scattered throughout the southern Huasteca in small, non-nucleated villages. Each village is a separate entity referred to as an *ejido*--an autonomous political unit in which all the land is owned jointly by village members who live and work in the community. The villages themselves are actually composed of dispersed clusters of family compounds. Typically, these compounds consist of the huts and outbuildings of a group of patrilineally related males and their families. Each family compound is connected to other such compounds through a complex series of jungle trails, which to the uninitiated are almost impossible to travel without aid from local inhabitants. However, the exact composition of any compound is highly flexible and generally is related to the availability of cultivable land. If land is plentiful then the components tend to be large, if it is not then compounds tend to split up as sons move away to areas available for cultivation.

Economically, the contemporary Aztec are self-sufficient slash-and-burn milpa horticulturalists. They grow all their own food and what they don't grow they gather from among the flora and fauna of the verdant jungle. Until relatively recent times these people even made their own cloth for their traditional clothing. In terms of cultivation, however, such cultigens as maize,

black beans, squash, melons, sugar cane, tobacco, tomatoes, coriander, etc. form the primary crops grown. Because of the nature of the village communities all men are first and foremost farmers. Each man is allocated enough land to support his immediate family and is considered to own this land as long as he continues to farm it. Some men, however, take up various secondary occupations, such as being a carpenter, a religious specialist called a *tlamatketl*, or a musician. These occupations are part-time but satisfy vital community needs. For example, the musicians perform all the traditional music that is played during the sacred ceremonial celebrations that comprise the religious cycle of the Aztecs. The recordings on this album represent selections from this traditional repertoire and will be discussed below in greater detail.

Aztec women are responsible for the running of the household and caring for the children. Secondary occupations consist of being potters, bone setters, as well as religious specialists. After these, the traditional Aztec lifestyle consists primarily in a daily round of activities that alternate typical existential problems with ritual and religious celebrations.



Tlaktelilis procession arriving at Shrine of Tonantsi'.

Religion and Ritual

The religious system of the Aztecs is composed of a series of beliefs and practices that reflect the vital concerns of a people who continue to follow a highly traditional lifestyle. Like virtually all Middle American Indian groups, Aztec religion today is a syncretization or blending of two historically unrelated traditions: Spanish Catholicism and pre-Columbian aboriginal beliefs. Because the horticultural life style of the Aztec has changed little since pre-

Columbian times, the indigenous religion remains primary. Intrusive elements from Spanish Catholicism are found in Aztec religious beliefs and practices but these have been thoroughly reinterpreted by the Indians and fit into what remains essentially aboriginal patterns.

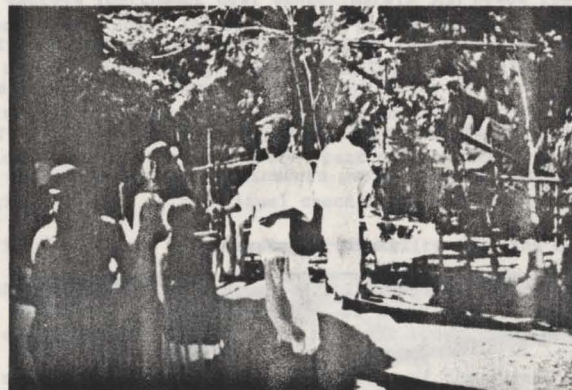
The Aztecs divide the universe into four separate realms or regions. First, there is Ilwihkaktli or the arc of the heavens. This region is symbolized in Aztec altars by a leaf covered arch to which has been attached representations of the sun or stars. The second region is the earth which in Nahuatl is called Tlali'. The earth is the seat of human activity and is represented in rituals by the surface of altar tables. Third is Miktlan or the realm of the dead which exists under the earth's surface. The souls of all people who die "naturally" go to Miktlan to live a life similar to that on earth. Miktlan is represented in religious rituals by a display which is located on the earth floor underneath of altar tables. Finally, there is Apan or the realm of water where all souls of people who die violently go. Apan is the region that connects all other regions into one integrated whole. The sky is reflected on its surface, streams and springs flow on the earth and yet their depths penetrate to Miktlan, the underworld. In religious rituals Apan is recognized by a display that is set up by a spot that has been designated as sacred to the water.

The subjects of Aztec rituals are a series of both harmful and beneficial spirit-beings who inhabit each of these regions. The sky is home to the high-god Toteotsi' who after creating the universe and humanity is content to watch over his creation without interference. In the underworld Tlakatekolotl, chief of the village of the dead, reigns supreme although he is by no means the incarnation of evil as is the Christian devil. The water realm is overseen by Apanchane', the lady of water, who looks out for each village but who must be constantly propitiated. On earth, in sacred caves, live the masters of the seeds who control the productivity of "their children", i.e. the important crops grown in the region. The most important of all spirit-beings is a mother diety named Tonantsi' who controls human and crop fertility. In fact the most extensive ritual occasion of the year is held in honor of Tonantsi' and it is during such a ritual held in 1972 that these recordings were made.

There are several dozen other spirit-beings that are recognized by the Aztecs each of which is subject to some ritual attention. Those spirits other

than Tonantsi' with the greatest impact on daily life are the ehekame. The word ehekame means winds or gusts and refers to a type of spirit-being that causes disease. In some cases these harmful spirits ride the wind and in other cases they are the wind. They originate from any of the four realms and travel from one region to another always searching or lurking about ready to enter the body of anyone they meet. Once in a person's body, they cause sickness, unhappiness, and eventually, death.

Religious rituals called generally Xochitlalia' are complex symbolic events that are designed to gain some control over spirit-beings for the benefit of individuals and entire villages. All but the most minor rituals are carried out by ritual specialists called tlamatiketl (person of knowledge). Ritual specialists are part-time only and work for fees to be paid by the sponsor of the particular rite. Either men or women may undergo the approximately one year of training necessary to begin an independent practice. One of the key skills for a ritual specialist to master is learning to cut complex figurines out of paper. These figurines represent the particular group of spirit entities the ritual is directed towards and must be cut anew for most rituals.



Ritual specialists accept beeswax candles from young girls.

The most common ritual occasion is the curing ceremony called a tleuchpantle' or cleansing. Curing is achieved through removal of ehekame spirits from the patient's body. Special offerings are made to the offending disease causing spirits, after which they are coaxed with special chants and cleansing procedures. The process may take anywhere from two hours to two days depending on

the seriousness of the patient's condition and the amount of money available for the cure. The larger curing ceremonies are always accompanied by guitar and violin music.

The most elaborate and extensive communal ritual is Tlakatelilis which occurs during the winter solstice and surrounds the fertility diety Tonantsi'. The ritual begins on December 20th and concludes with an all night offering on December 24th. The ritual specialists organize the rite and during all phases of tlakatelilis guitar and violin music is required. Tonantsi is the pre-Columbian fertility diety of which the Virgin of Guadalupe is the modern syncretized version. A small statuette of the Virgin of Guadalupe who in the minds of the Aztecs is a manifestation of Tonantsi', is carried in a procession to each house in the village. The ritual specialists perform a 10-15 minute ritual at each dwelling in which the power of Tonantsi' is invoked on behalf of the household members.

At night the statuette and other ritual paraphernalia are placed on an altar and "rested" until dawn. During the night musicians strike up dance music and two lines of men dance before the altar. On the final night of the ritual, the statuette is placed on a highly decorated altar in a small shrine. Sometime near midnight a massive offering is made to Tonantsi' on behalf of the entire village. The statuette remains on this altar all during the next year.

Music is considered to be an integral component on any major ritual occasion. It is part of the offering of beautiful things that forms the core of all religious rituals. There are two basic types of music recorded here. The first is especially sacred and is played only during the more important parts of a ritual sequence. These highly sacred musical forms are called xochisones which means 'flower songs'. There are many different melodic and rhythmic variations of xochisones, each of which is associated with a particular part of the ritual. These sacred musical pieces have no specific names. The second kind of music recorded here is associated with ceremonial dancing called ayakachmitotia or 'rattle dances'. The outstanding feature of the dance music is its rhythmic quality. Only in the dance music are each of the different pieces named. In most cases these names refer to the particular step associated with the piece but names can also derive from plants or animals.



Ayakachmitotia' dancers.

There are three musical instruments heard in these recordings. The sacred music forms employ just violin and guitar while the dance forms include in addition to violin and guitar a hand held gourd rattle. Violins are purchased in the markets by individual musicians and vary a great deal in quality. In 1973 an average instrument cost approximately 500 pesos (\$40.00 U.S.) which is a considerable expenditure according to local standards. Since musicians are paid for most of their performances it is possible to earn the cost of an instrument in a relatively short time. The guitars are extremely crude and cost 200-300 pesos. They are strummed without a pick and although the guitarist does execute chord changes, the primary function of the guitar seems to be in the rhythm it provides. Rattles are made by individual males who use them during dance performances. Other musical instruments commonly used by the Huastecan Aztecs but not recorded here include the jarana, a small ukelele type instrument, and drums used during the Ahuili' ceremony in February.

The works recorded here do not constitute a representative sample of all Aztec music forms, but rather they are representative of that part of their music that accompanies sacred activities. The recordings were made under extremely difficult field conditions. Each piece was recorded during an actual performance of a ritual using a hand-held microphone. Because the recordings are authentic there are village sounds as well as crowd noises from groups of Indians in the background of each piece. Aztec rituals are disorganized events in which there is much talking, movement, and crowding.

For this reason you will occasionally hear noise, as a child or perhaps a dancer jostles the microphone. The spontaneity and authenticity of the music recorded is, we believe, more important in capturing the essence of the event than the imposition of studio conditions on the performers. Recordings were made on a Sony 800B taperecorder, using an electrovoice microphone. Tape used was Ampex 631, 1.5 mil.

Side A

1 - Xochipitsauak³ 5:29

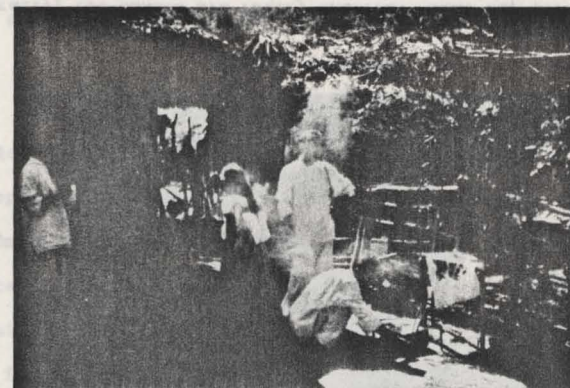
Xochipitsauak is perhaps the most widely known piece of sacred music in the entire Huasteca. The name means little flower in Nahuatl and the piece itself is played at all sacred occasions in which music has a part. It is an appropriately named work since flowers are one of the key symbols in Aztec religious life. Among other meanings, flowers symbolize the fecundity of the earth and the power of Tonantsi⁴; the fertility diety for whom this particular piece is being performed. Xochipitsauak is always played at the beginning of a ritual and is used as the lead piece for sacred dances.

In this performance the listener can hear ritual participants talking in the background as they discuss plans for adorning the altar upon which the statue of Tonantsi⁵ has been placed for the night. One can also hear the intermittent sound of rattles as the dancers perform before Tonantsi⁶ in order to keep her company during the night-long vigil. The dancers and musicians will continue until dawn when the ritual specialists will return and continue the house to house procession with the statues.

2 - <u>Sacred Music</u>	8:34	entering house	1:25
		setting up altar	2:00
		ritual begins	1:38
		offering is consecrated	2:26
		preparation to leave house,	
		walking to next house	1:45

This is a recording of the musical sequence accompanying the short ritual carried out at each house during the winter solstice fertility ceremony. Although actually composed of five distinct pieces the music is played continuously without a break between selections. The musicians lead a procession composed of the young unmarried girls in the village, each carrying a lighted beeswax candle. A

few of the girls carry the statues and other ritual paraphernalia between houses. There is also an older woman called a kopalmitotiketl who carries a smoking incense brazier in the procession. Two ritual specialists walk in the procession and a crowd of onlookers tags along behind.



House ceremony.

The musicians lead the procession up to a house and the ritual specialists, young girls, and old woman enter. Household members have a small table set up which has been highly decorated with flowers, embroidered cloth, and small trinkets purchased in the market. The statues are placed on the table and offerings of maize, black beans, coins and soft drinks are brought out and placed under the table as the musicians change tempo and melody. Then the ritual specialists chant and sacralize the items to be offered to Tonantsi⁷. The musicians change tempo and melody again as the most sacred part of the ritual approaches. The old woman begins to dance as the ritual specialists ask Tonantsi⁸ to accept the various offerings and visit her blessing of fertility upon the household. Once again the music changes as the statues and offerings are gathered up, handed to the girls and the procession moves to the next house. While walking, small Roman candle rockets are set off in commemoration of the events and their explosions can be heard near the end of the recording.

Throughout the ritual the group of young girls stand in a tight group to the side of the altar. While the music continues, they sway back and forth as a group and one girl rings a bell with the beat. The bell is to gain Tonantsi⁹'s attention and to insure that she accepts the offerings. The first piece lasts 1:25 and is played while the procession members enter the house. Music of

the second piece, lasting 2:00 is played while the altar is being prepared. The ritual formally begins as musicians play the third piece, lasting 1:38. The forth piece extending 1:26 is played as the offering is made and the old woman dances with the incensor. As preparations are made to leave the house and the procession moves down the trail the musicians play the fifth piece lasting about 1:45.

3 - Dance of the Tlamatiketl 2:41

In this recording the height of the winter solstice fertility ritual has been reached. Sometime past midnight on December 24th an enormous offering of the finest prepared dishes, tobacco, herbs, flowers, market purchased bottled drinks, white rum, and more is laid out on the long altar in the village shrine to Tonantsi'. Over 100 people crowd into the small thatch roofed building as the ritual specialists carrying a smoking incense brazier in one hand and a sacrificed chicken in the other dance wildly throughout the crowd. At this moment Tonantsi' is being summoned to enter the shrine, accept the many offerings and confer her blessing on the gathered villagers. Following the dance of the ritual specialists all people in the shrine will move along the altar with its many offerings and bow several times. The ritual specialists proceed out of the shrine and make a final offering at the base of an ancient ruined stone pyramid that is located in the forest.

The music contributes to the tension of the final night, the culmination of four days of ritual activity. Throughout the night the group of young girls stands to the side of the main altar swaying in unison to the music. Again, one girl rings a bell to call the attention of Tonantsi' to the proceedings. Outside of the shrine costumed dancers continue to perform the rattle dances to music provided by a different violinist and guitarist. Shortly after the dance of the tlamatiketl (ritual specialist) the ritual is ended and people return home.

Ayakachmitotia'-rattle dances

The three selections recorded on this side of the album represent the typical musical background played for the ritual dancing that is performed for their fertility diety Tonantsi' during the winter solstice ceremony called Tlaketililis. The dances are performed only by males and are called

Ayakachmitotia', so named after the gourd rattles that the men carry and shake in time to the various dance steps and musical accompaniment. All the dances have specific names such as Nopalli', Coatl, Ehtokani', Etl and generally commemorate agricultural activities such as planting of maize, frijoles, etc.; however some of the dances are merely dedicated to the entertainment of Tonantsi' and her worshippers.

Rattle dances usually take place only at night and are rather long in duration, sometimes lasting up to one hour. The dances themselves are seen as offerings or sacrifices dedicated to Tonantsi' and the more energy and effort invested in their execution the more they are appreciated by the diety. In fact, this element of sacrifice is considered to be the primary raison d'etre for the dances themselves. Informants state that throughout the year Tonantsi' supplies all that is necessary for a good life--food, health, happiness, etc., and thus feel it is only fitting that during the ceremony dedicated to the honor of Tonantsi', her followers sacrifice as much of their goods, energy and time as is possible in order to show as much gratitude and appreciation as possible. Indeed, informants will state that physical exhaustion in her honor is testimony to her honor as much as physical offerings.



Home altar to Tonantsi'.

Structurally, the dances are fairly uniform. That is, each dance involves a large number of participants and begins with the dancers lining up in two parallel lines. The dance lines face the altar on which the image of Tonantsi' rests. A dance leader positions himself between the two lines and leads off the dance performance. Each dancer wears a crown made of bamboo and decorated

with pieces of long colorful ribbons, cloth, flowers, and mirrors. In addition, each dancer holds a gourd rattle in one hand and a carved wooden disc known as a maxochitl or hand flower, in the other. Once the dancing begins it continues throughout the night with only short intervals between each performance. By morning all the dancers are thoroughly exhausted and as mentioned above see their physical condition as testimony to the greater honor of Tonantsi'.

1 - Nopalli' 3:58

Named after the prickly pear cactus (the Nopal) this dance is typical of the many that are performed during Tlaketelilis. The dancers arranged in the usual parallel rows move rhythmically back and forth, alternately facing each other and then the image of Tonantsi'. During Nopalli' each dancer trades places with the dance leader for several minutes, the leader filling the vacant spot in the line. This procedure allows each dancer to perform solo for part of the dance sequence. Individual expertise during these solos are the object of much admiration. The listener will note that rattles can be heard in the background of the musical accompaniment during this recording.

2 - Koatl 7:50

Koatl means snake in Nahuatl and is unusual in format from the other dances recorded here since the two parallel lines, the hallmark of the rattle dances, are combined into one long line that symbolically imitates the movements of a snake as it proceeds back and forth in front of the image of Tonantsi'.

3 - Ehtokani' 7:24

Ehtokani' is more typical of the rattle dances in general and is similar in format to Nopalli' described above. Ehtokani' is considered by informants to be meant primarily for the entertainment of Tonantsi'. The two parallel dance lines alternatively face the altar and then withdraw some distance from it, returning after executing a few quick steps. The repetition of this procedure is the major motif that is associated with this last selection.

Footnotes

1. The master tapes for this record were prepared at the Archives of Traditional Music, Indiana University, Bloomington, where the collection is preserved.
2. Nahuatl words in this text are written with the English speaker in mind; they are approximations of spoken Nahuatl using English phonemes. e = April, x = sh, A = Father, ' = glottal stop, i = me, o = oh, u(vowel) = w(vowel).
3. The violinist for Xochipitsauak and the rattle dances is Hermenejildo Montaña Hernandez. The violinist for the sacred music is Juan Jeronimo Hernandez. All guitar accompaniment is provided by Antonio Bautista Hernandez.

The Huasteca

The Huasteca is a multi-ethnic area. For besides the spoken Nahuatl, the region is also inhabited by a number of other, distinct Indian groups. These are: the Huasteca (the people for whom this report will speak), the Otomi and the Totonac Indians. The Huasteca has long had a reputation for being remote and isolated area. This reputation is well deserved and as testimony to this fact it could be pointed out that today the Huasteca Huasteca has only one road that penetrates the region. Most travel, therefore, must be done by air or by boat—as in fact—especially so in the rainy season when the road and trails become impassable quantities of mud. This is accentuated by the region's