

Adrift in *el Istmo*: a Kite Journey to Juchitán

On the southern coast of Mexico, where the North American continent narrows between the Gulf of Mexico and Pacific Ocean, there is a region known as the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. *El Istmo*, or the Isthmus, is unlike any place else in Mexico. It is one of the most purely indigenous regions in the country, and its relative isolation between the mountainous highlands of Oaxaca and Chiapas has preserved many old traditions which have long since died out in other parts of the country. Among these unique customs is the practice of flying kites for the Day of the Dead. It is an old tradition that is now fading away, especially as the Isthmus becomes more connected to the outside world. However, there are two small villages in *el Istmo*, known as San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar, where the tradition of flying kites is still thriving.

In early February 2008, I traveled to the Isthmus to visit several indigenous villages around the city of Juchitán where I was told that people still make kites. The region is heavily Zapotec, and most people in the vicinity are bilingual, with one important exception. There is a small peninsula known as the Zona Huave where people speak a language completely unconnected to Zapotec, called Ombeayüits and the people call themselves Icot.

Marginalized even amongst indigenous communities, this region is one of the few places left in Oaxaca where the tradition of kite making lives on. Not only are kites made every year for the Day of the Dead, but the Icot make a living by fishing with kites in the ocean—a tradition not found anywhere else in Mexico.

The people of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar have lived along the narrow barrier peninsula on the edge of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec since before the arrival of the Spanish. They live a spartan lifestyle, and for centuries they have depended on fishing, and on the bounty

of the sea, to survive. Their houses, made from concrete blocks and thatched palm roofs, are the only sign of human habitation on an otherwise barren and impossibly remote landscape.

Although the region is referred to as the “Zona Hauve” by outsiders, the people of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar strongly disdain the term “Huave,” which is actually a deprecatory Zapotec word meaning “rotten parrot.” Rather, they call themselves Icot, which is not a name, but simply means “our people.”

The villages of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar are reminders of a culture and history that are often overlooked by the contemporary narrative of Mexican history. The great achievements of Pre-Colombian cultures, such as the Mayan or Zapotec, form a core part of the Mexican identity. But present-day indigenous communities are often stigmatized as backward, and viewed as barriers to progress. The presence of the Icot, and that of countless other living indigenous cultures, is directly at odds with the idea of a unified national identity. Their rich cultural legacy cannot be found in the history books, but it is passed down nonetheless through oral history and customs from father to son.

I traveled to Juchitán on a rickety *Estrella Roja de Sureste* second-class bus. All second-class buses leave out of the Central Bus Terminal, located next door to the sprawling *Abastos* street market, whose ten block radius packs in an amazing density of people, livestock, produce, and every kind of plastic trinket and XXX rated movie imaginable. Leaving Oaxaca from *Abastos* is like emerging from the center of a great ant hill. The city seems to swirl around in a haze of cars, tractor trailers, and a swarm of pedestrians.

The highway to the ocean winds its way along the ridges of the *Sierra Madre del Sur* mountains. As the crow flies, the coast is less than 100 miles from Oaxaca City. Yet it takes seven hours to drive there because the highway meanders back and forth along the ridges of the

mountains. As the road descends, the vegetation dramatically changes. The tops of the mountains are covered with pine trees, and as I ascended higher up, the coniferous forests become thicker and lush.

The mountains end abruptly at the ocean, and after we turned down a bend in the road I could suddenly see the Pacific glittering a few miles in the distance. Sandy plains stretched to the sea, dotted with palm trees. I discovered that large coconut plantations line the coast, creating the illusion of a Caribbean paradise, even though the natural landscape is desert-like and thorny.

As I got off the bus in Juchitán, I immediately felt as though I had entered a sauna. The air was thick with the scent of tropical plants and heavy with humidity. *El Istmo* is cut off from the rest of Mexico by the *Sierra Madre del Sur* mountains, and going there is like traveling to a different country. The geographic isolation of the isthmus has created a cultural bubble of customs and religious practices which are not seen anywhere else in Mexico. Forbidden delicacies such as eating sea turtle eggs and iguana meat for breakfast are still widely practiced, and in the past, animal rights activists have been run out of town for trying to enforce international restrictions on their consumption.

There are perhaps three thousand people who live in San Mateo and a little more than a thousand who live in Santa Maria. There is only one road which leads to the peninsula, which begins as a two lane highway and then turns into a sandy, dirt road. In Juchitán I teamed up with a local painter named Cristián Piñeda, who offered to guide me around the region. To reach the villages we had to travel through a heavily fortified military barricade at the edge of the peninsula. Armed soldiers ordered us to leave our car as they searched the inside for evidence of narcotics.

The long empty stretches of beach along the peninsula make it an ideal dumping spot for planes delivering shipments of narcotics from Columbia into Mexico. In recent years, the peninsula has become heavily militarized as part of Mexican President Felipe Calderon's intensified war on drugs. Upon entering the Zona Huave, I saw at least thirty armed soldiers stationed at the barricade, checking every car that went in and out.

The people of San Mateo and Santa Maria are ultimately caught in between the military and the drug cartels. The Mexican military has a history of abuse towards indigenous groups in Mexico, especially in Chiapas, and they suspect the villages of abetting the cartels. Meanwhile, the drug cartels actively exploit the extreme poverty of the villages. Most Icots are fishermen, but for many young men, trafficking narcotics provides a lucrative and tempting alternative to the poverty of the peninsula and the lack of other jobs.

Because of this tension, and because of their long history of exploitation by outsiders, the Icot towns are extremely hermetic, and most people are very distrustful of outsiders, even those from neighboring Juchitán. Perhaps that is why after arriving in San Mateo, Cristián and I were immediately taken to meet the local *comite* (town council). They meet every day in a large open air room just behind the local *preparatoria* (high school), where they attend to town business and discuss any disputes with people from the neighboring villages.

As I entered, the *comite* sat facing me lined in a row, and suddenly I got an aching feeling that I was about to be interrogated for some unknown offense. Eight pairs of eyes sat staring at me, impassive and stoic. A momentary silence filled the room, as neither of us were quite sure what to say.

In my head, I began to lay out my argument, defending my reasons for being there, explaining that I had no ulterior motives, and hoping that kites were a sufficiently apolitical

subject to exculpate me from any wrong doing. Although my intentions were good, I was preparing myself to be questioned, interrogated and found unworthy to do research in the town.

However, this momentary fear was quite unnecessary. Instead of making a case for myself, I shared with them my stories about studying kites in Guatemala. I made clear that my only purpose for coming was to investigate local kite traditions, and to learn more about the unique practice of kite fishing in San Mateo.

Like opening a window in a dark room, the mood changed almost immediately. They no longer viewed me as a threat, but perhaps as simply eccentric for being so interested in kites. Their demeanor became more relaxed and the mood became almost jovial. Before too long, everyone was eager to share their own story about flying kites.

Like in Guatemala, special kites are also made for the Day of the Dead. One of the women on the Junta told me that the kites are sent to guide the spirits of the dead back down to earth, but that the kite also symbolizes a person's soul as it is being lifted into heaven. They are flown on October 31st to guide the souls down from Heaven and again on November 1st to raise them back into heaven.

The kites are made in many different shapes. Some are star shaped and others are simple arch topped kites. One man on the council described to me a very special kind of kite called a *quip*, which is made in the shape of a cone, and it is unique because it can be flown without a tail. Another common kite is shaped like a hexagon and called a *barrilete*. This is same word used for 'kite' in Guatemala. The word for kite in Mexico is *papalote*, and in the Icot language, it is *papalotl*. Incidentally, the most common kite shape in Guatemala is also a hexagon!

The uncanny connection between the two towns seems to suggest the existence of a much older kite tradition, perhaps one that was introduced during colonial times when Mexico was a

part of the trade route to Asia. But there is also a possibility that the kite is linked to pre-Colombian paper-making rituals. Paper was an important part of Aztec and Mayan religious rituals, and many sacred sacrificial objects were made from paper, including clothing, weapons and large hanging banners. I hope to explore these connections in a future essay.

The kites for the Day of the Dead are made with a thin stick frame. In years past, they used a plant known as *gulabere*, to make the glue, and sometimes the fibers of the *maguery* plant were used to make the string. The frame was usually covered with *papel de cemento* and *papel de china*, cement paper and tissue paper, respectively. The kites were made in conjunction with *ofrendas* or offerings of food and flowers for the graves of loved ones.

A local writer from Juchitán named Victor Terán told me that the kites in Juchitán were made in the shape of *beayñets* or ornamental wreaths made in the shape of a cross and decorated with flowers. According to Terán, these kites were much bigger than the kites made during the rest of the year, and they were made specifically to celebrate the spirits of the dead.

The practice of kite fishing stemmed from the tradition of flying kites for the Day of the Dead and is a relatively recent creation that began in the 1960's. Soon after, kite fishing became very popular and was quickly adopted by local fishermen. It is an ingenious strategy to fish in the notoriously dangerous waters off the Oaxacan coast.

Puerto Escondido, the famous surfing Mecca, is less than two hours from the Zona Huave. It is known worldwide for its monumental rolling waves, matched only by Hawaii in their height and intensity. The same giant waves also hit the barrier peninsula of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar. Not only do the waves make swimming dangerous, but there is an extremely strong riptide that can pull a swimmer a mile out into the ocean in a matter of minutes.

For this reason, the fishermen of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar fished in

the relatively calm waters of the *laguna superior*. But since the development of kite fishing, they are now able to catch hundreds of kilos of fish without ever having to set foot in the ocean.

The kites vary in size, but mostly they are between three and five feet in length and the skin is made from nylon sacks. Because the winds along the coast are extremely powerful, the kites lift up quickly and exert a tremendous amount of pull. In fact, a few hours to the north of Juchitán there is an electric wind farm in a town called *la Ventosa*, the windy place, where the wind is continually funneled between two mountains. Sometimes the winds are so strong that it requires several men to reel in just one kite.

The fishermen usually set their nets out at night or early in the morning. They leave the kites flying all night and come back the next day. The winds are strong enough to support the kite continuously during this time. Aside from the tail, the kite is attached to a long rope, which is then attached to a net. The net is then anchored by a bucket filled with stones. This also serves to anchor the kite. Essentially, the kite is flown from the water, not the land.

When the kite is lifted from the beach, it pulls the net, along with the anchor, into the ocean. Another long rope is tied to the opposite end of the net, connecting the net to the land. On land, the cord is anchored to a wooden post or buried deep in the sand. On a good day, the fishermen are capable of catching up to three hundred kilos of fish.

Accompanied by Catalina Mendoza of the *comite*, I traveled half an hour west to Santa Maria del Mar to meet with a man named Reynaldo Ramirez Bartolo. Santa Maria is a small collection of palm roofed homes which seemed to be huddled around a tiny main plaza with an old white church on one end and a basketball court on the other. I wanted to meet with Reynaldo because he was among the first fishermen to begin fishing with kites. His house is on the outskirts of the town, a low-roofed building with walls made of smooth grey colored concrete.

The rooms of the house face a large open patio, encircled by a bamboo fence. The sound of giant waves can be heard in the distance like muffled thunder. Reynaldo welcomed us into his home with a warm smile. Neatly folded fishing nets hung from posts along the patio.

Reynaldo told me that a man by the name of Juan Martinez Robles was the first fisherman to begin fishing with kites. Before then, some fishermen would fish in the ocean using nets tied to floating *gallones* (large plastic containers), but it was cumbersome and difficult to get the nets beyond where the waves break.

At that time, kites were viewed as something sacred by *los viejos*, the older people, but the use of the kites for fishing came about because of the necessity of the *pueblo*, the community. The soil on the peninsula is mostly made of sand and it is not suited for agriculture. Therefore, fishing is the primary form of income for these towns. The kites have dramatically increased their yield of fish, some of which is now sold commercially, providing a small profit. But even so, the majority of the yield is still consumed locally, and many of the families struggle to obtain basic food and medicine.

After returning to San Mateo, Catalina invited me to her home. Her husband is a fisherman, she told me, and she wanted to show us how the kites were made. In a simple room, her husband laid out several *pencas de coco*, the stems of dried palm fronds. The stems are cut to the right size with a machete and then stripped of the bark. Using these sticks to create the frame, he assembled a simple square diamond kite.

The frame is covered with an industrial nylon sack used to carry sugar cane. The corners are tied with string to secure them to the frame and the bridle line is tied to the spine and then pulled through a hole to the front of the kite. The tail is made up of a long string of torn rags, knotted together and attached to the kite using a nylon fishing cord. The line is made of a thicker

nylon cord. They are simple utilitarian kites, but they are nonetheless well made and sturdy.

As I was about to leave, I was abruptly stopped by an imposing figure in the doorway of Señora Catalina's home. A tall, stately woman entered the room dressed in a radiant yellow *huipil* and a flowing black dress. Her long grey hair was braided with red *cintas*, ribbons, and tied together in a bow behind her back. After looking closer, I saw that she was an ancient woman, with piercing black eyes.

Señora Catalina introduced the ancient woman as her mother. She gave me a haughty look and remained standing in the doorway. I humbled myself before her, bowing slightly as I shook her hand, and the old woman gave me a small smile. In her posture I could see the reflection of Señora Catalina's proud and commanding demeanor. She said nothing to me, but wordlessly she consented to my presence in her home.

Only months after visiting the Zona Huave did I begin to realize the unique opportunity that had been given to me. After being isolated and marginalized for centuries, the people of San Mateo del Mar and Santa Maria del Mar are naturally distrustful of outsiders. They carefully guard the secrets of their culture. But despite that fear, the people of San Mateo opened up to me in a way I had not expected. Señora Catalina opened her home and allowed me to glimpse into one small part of her rich and ancient culture.

As we walked back to the car, I saw two young boys in the school yard flying kites. One of them stopped and came up to us carrying a bright red one in the shape of a *barrilete*. He asked me a question in Ombeayüits, which I could not understand. A moment later he handed me the kite string, and I need no further explanation. We sat there flying kites in the late afternoon. It was early February and long past kiting season, but it didn't seem to matter much.