Libana. Zapotec ceremonial speech

Víctor Cata
Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes
victorcata@hotmail.com
Juchitán is located in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, in the South of Mexico.
The language diidxazá

The language diidxazá or Isthmus Zapotec is spoken in some 25 towns in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The language has also been named as Coastal Plains Zapotec. It belongs to the Otomanguean stock of Mesoamerican languages.
2. What is the libana.

The *libana* is a prehispanic religious register restricted to the rite of matrimony among Isthmus Zapotecas. The *libana* has been preserved in Juchitán through the prodigious memory of community elders referred to as *xuaana* ‘spiritual leader’.
To date, Mariano López Nicolás is the only living xuaana with competence in this register. His knowledge goes back to several generations of xuaana.

Mariano learned the libana from his father Bruno López who had learned it from his own grandfather Anastacio Jiménez born ca. 1840. It is the men in the family who have transmitted and guarded the knowledge related to the libana.

In an interview with Mariano López Nicolás, he explained to me the process through which he learned the libana:
Memories of Mariano López Nicolás.

“My father would recite *libana* to me just like I did it for you today. I learned it by heart. He would recite *libana* to me at night, he would recite it and recite it to me until I learned it.”
Xuaana Mariano López Nicolás in church
The learning process is not limited to memorization, but involves gesture, management of the stage, an ability to coordinate the participation of others following social protocol as to assign each participant its rightful place in the ceremony. In other words, teaching *libana* involves the teaching of knowledge of a message, its delivery and the context in which it is delivered.

Mariano López Nicolás describes this learning process as follows:
“In order for you to be able to recite *libana* you need your mentor present. The first time I did it, my father took me. You can get very nervous, there are a lot of people in front of you, you start to shake, you don’t know what to say, everyone is looking at you.

My father sat in the audience and watched me. I started then, placed the flowers, lit the candles, I ushered the parents to their seats and made the bride and groom kneel before the altar. Then I started to talk, I talked and said everything I had learned.”
"When I was back home, my father called me up and said: “Here you made a mistake. Here you missed this, there you missed this other thing. Correct those mistakes and you will be ready to become a xuaana.”
3. Structure of the *libana*.

- The *libana* is comprised of the following elements:

  a. *Archaisms.*

    Within the first five minutes of a *libana* performance, one finds around 60 archaic Zapotec words. These archaic words have become incomprehensible to contemporary Zapotec speakers. The meaning of some of these words might not even be known by the *xuaana* himself. The documentation work I have done on the *libana* was in part possible through extensive consultation of the *Vocabulario Castellano zapoteco* de fray Juan de Córdova, the oldest dictionary of a Zapotec language that dates back to 1572.
To illustrate, consider the terms used to refer to a man. Women, children and homosexuals use the term *nguiiu* to refer to a man. In the *libana*, the term *bigaana* is the native word with which a man can refer to another man. However, contemporary Zapotec men no longer use the word *bigaana* and no longer recognize it or understand it for its meaning. Instead, contemporary men use the Spanish loanword “*hombre*”.
Following are some other archaisms found in the libana:

- Befuana. Sir.
- Becoogo’. Cushion.
- Bigaana. male.
- Biguini. hummingbird, small bird.
- Bilaba’. to count.
- Binabi. exemplar.
- Biini. young.
- Bíni. Brightness.
- Bionna. virginity.
- Caachi’. Beautiful.
- Oquidó’. Lord.
b. Invoking the Zapotec Deities.

During colonial times, Zapotecs were heavily persecuted by the church for their native religious practices. Nevertheless, many aspects of their religion have survived in contemporary festivities and discourse, as in the case of the *libana* which contains reference to Zapotec deities. This is illustrated with the following examples.
Examples of the Zapotec Deities.

1. The Great Breath moved the two houses.

2. In the heights, where God Thirteen lives, in the beautiful corn patch.

3. The goddess Xunaxidó’, the Goddess of Death, received the lilly with which she instated the rite of matrimony around the world.
c. Myths.

Myths are sacred texts that explain the origin of the world, the origin of life and of all things, just as it is done in the Bible, the Koran and the Bhagavad Gita. The *libana* is a window into Zapotec cosmology:

- “Now, I waited for the bright star to emerge, the sacred star, the immaculate star: Venus.
- Now, I waited for night to fall, for the Earth to die.
- Now, I waited for Him who is called Our Father, to descend.
- For the Divine Sun who shed light on the sky and around the world.”
Phrase pairings is a discourse strategy commonly used in Mesoamerica. It consists of the use of a sequence of two words or phrases to generate new meaning. For instance, *daa – bicuugu* ‘rug – chair’ generates the meaning of power and authority. This particular example is no longer in use among contemporary Zapotec because the rug and the chair no longer symbolize power. Were we to develop new phrase pairings to express modern day notions of power, the referents would perhaps be a municipal office and a seal featuring an eagle – a Mexican national symbol.
Examples of the phrase pairings.

1. rug – pillow, chair
   = power, dominance
2. sacred word – immaculate word
   = pristine speech
3. on the river – on the road
   = under different circumstances
4. hummingbird flower – fragrant hummingbird
   = maiden
5. amount – road = tradition
4. Current state of the *libana* practice.

Some 70 years ago, there was a large number of *xuaana* who could perform the *libana*.

Following is a list of those *xuaana* who participated in my documentation efforts:

- Sabino Baltazar.
- Matías Guerra.
- Anastacio Jiménez.
- Apolonio Aquino.
- Pedro Guerra.
- Jacinto Dxia.
- Benito Canale.
Ca. 1940 Zapotec women.
The *libana* was performed on a Monday at 7pm, both in the groom’s home as well as in the bride’s home. Currently, it is performed in the church and only if there is no other church event requiring the wedding party to exit the church. When there is pressure to vacate the church, the Catholic priest will ask the *xuaana* to rush his speech or skip it altogether.

Nowadays, the families involved in a wedding are often more interested in holding a party than on the performance of the *libana*.

Contemporary Zapotecs have conflicting attitudes towards the *libana*. There is a segment of the population who continues to appreciate this form of discourse as a pristine speech, the speech of genuine Zapotecs. A growing segment of the population, however, considers it a ridiculous genre given that they are no longer able to understand it.
Libana ceremony in church
A Zapotec party.
5. Conclusion.

- I dedicated 13 years to scratching the memory of the elders in my search for the *libana*. Sometimes I was only able to document short one- or two-line segments. Other times, all I found was the despair of elders here and there who struggled to remember the discourses they heard in their youth.

- Beyond recording the *libana* pen on paper, this documentation effort represents the possibility of reinstating the *libana* as a meaningful act in contemporary Zapotec society.
The *libana* is an important part of Zapotec literature, a vast canvas of words that has been torn little by little over time by the following factors:

a. socio-cultural factors:
   - the adoption of new cultural practices (ver imagen)
   - the false notion that the Zapotec language hampers the acquisition of knowledge

b. linguistic factors:
   - the increasing dominance of Spanish in Zapotec homes
   - the decrease in the number of speakers of Zapotec. To date, Juchitán has some 93,000 inhabitants of which less than 50% speak the local Zapotec language (INEGI 2010).
Modern Zapotec women posing for a photo shoot
Modern Zapotec women in a fashion show