

# ETHNOBIOTICA

Those of us who have worked with Native American or First Nations communities in North America are in the habit of honoring the elders as repositories of a precious heritage of environmental knowledge and wisdom. The unfortunate truth is that the younger generations rarely have had the opportunity to master the intricacies of this traditional knowledge nor to learn through practice the value of that knowledge. Witness reports in this issue of the *Journal of Ethnobiology*: Estabrook's requiem for a peasant agricultural system in Portugal and Florey and Wolff's account of the suppression of traditional healing ritual and associated use of plant medicines on Seram, eastern Indonesia. However, this is not everywhere the case. I have been heartened by my recent experience in Oaxaca, Mexico where the initial phase of my Zapotec ethnobiology is nearly done. The village of San Juan Mixtepec is the focus of this study. It appears to be a rather average Mexican peasant town, still heavily dependent on subsistence agriculture, planting the famous Mesoamerican staples, corns, beans, and squash. The setting is typically dramatic: perched on a ledge of the Sierra Madre del Sur with pine forest at its back; a sweep of arid subtropical woodland and cultivated lands below. Yet like many rural communities in Oaxaca, it is losing population; the young people leave seeking cash employment or in pursuit of education. Still the community retains a powerful hold on its children. Virtually all are proud to speak Zapotec as their first language.

San Juan has its elders, of course, several in their 90s. But what most impressed me is the children. Let me introduce you to one, Mari Elena, who turned 13 last August. She's a fourth grader in the village primary school; the youngest of five daughters of Rosalía Hernández and Cándido Cruz. Her next older sister, Justina, just graduated from the local secondary school and has left to go live with another sister in the city of Tehuantepec, helping her in her business. Justina served as my assistant last year, helping with plant collections, as had the eldest daughter, Inez Virgen. Inez now lives in a coastal town, but her daughter, Lilia, who is seven, has stayed behind, largely in the care of Mari Elena, her aunt.

This past summer with the onset of the rains and the initial weeding of their milpas, Mari Elena got the idea to bring me bags of plants each evening, recounting their names and uses, for which she received a few pesos. I warned her that I only wanted different plants; no duplicates. For two weeks running nearly every evening came the soft knock on my door. Mari Elena with one or more of her younger kin, each clutching a bag of plants. I dropped what I was doing, dumped the plants out on the patio, and did a "rapid environmental assessment" on the spot, one plant at a time: *Zhaw IE guizh ri?* "What is this plant called?" Then, *Par ne rquina?* "What is it used for?" I could identify maybe half the plants to genus and/or species; the rest were just leaves. Day by day the total mounted, reaching 686 the night before my departure for the states. Toward the end there was some duplication as other children tried to get a piece of the action. Once I had four children contending for my attention. When her turn came Lilia would blurt out the name of her plant, on occasion gently corrected by Mari Elena. Analyzing the resulting list showed that Mari Elena and Lilia used 369 distinct names for 471 plants specimens and made virtually no errors. Based on this rather casual experiment, I believe it is fair to estimate Lilia's repertoire of distinct plant names at over 300; Mari Elena's at over 500! I doubt they are unusual in this regard amongst their peers. Ironically, Mari Elena is two years behind where she should be in school. Her father reports that she is unhappy there. I am certain her teachers have no inkling of her intellectual gifts nor of her passion for plants. At least Mari Elena has not let school interfere with her botanical education.

Could it be that children are born to learn plant names? Only if they are deprived of the opportunity does this gift wither and go unfulfilled.

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