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Stepping Out

In the indigenous *muxe* culture of Mexico's Oaxaca state, alternative notions of sexuality are not only accepted, they're celebrated. ELENI N. GAGE reports

SITTING IN THE CHURCH of San Vicente Ferrer in the dusty Mexican city of Juchitán, I watched a woman in tight jeans, a red crop top, and ornate gold earrings make her way to receive Holy Communion. It was only when she swallowed the wafer Padre Francisco placed in her mouth that I noticed her Adam's apple bobbing and knew for certain what the priest had known all along: This woman is a man.

Actually, she's a *muxe* (pronounced "moo-she"), the local name given to men who dress like women, or dress like men but have male lovers and hold traditionally female jobs—weaver, party planner, hairdresser. Susana Trilling, who runs a cooking school in Oaxaca city, five hours from Juchitán, first told me about the *muxes* in her kitchen. "On the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, especially in Juchitán, every family considers it a blessing to have one gay son," she said. "These sons do handicrafts and sell embroideries in the market with the women, while the men work in the fields, so it's a monetary boon to the family. And while daughters marry and leave home, a *muxe* cares for his parents in their old age."

I tried to find more information in Oaxaca's bookstores, but none of the clerks even knew the word *muxe*. Finally I happened »

Zita, a former queen of the annual festival celebrating Juchitán's *muxe* community, dressed for the festival ball as La Señorita Ecológica.



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to meet Vittorio D'Onofri, an Italian photographer who has been shooting the muxes for years. D'Onofri explained that in a culture where female virginity is prized, muxes also serve as a sexual outlet for men before marriage, often dating men who go on to marry women. "I know couples where the husband used to have a muxe boyfriend and the wife goes to the muxe for tips," he told me.

D'Onofri photographs the muxes during their annual November festival, La Vela de las Auténticas Intrépidas Buscadoras del Peligro, or Festival of the Authentic, Intrepid Danger-Seekers. Life in Tehuantepec revolves around velas, weekend festivals in honor of a saint or family clan. I knew I had to attend the festival of the Intrépidas, and when I made the journey back to Oaxaca last year, I thought I knew what to expect. But still I was surprised to see a priest offer Communion to a transvestite. I shouldn't have been. Not in Juchitán.

"JUCHITÁN HAS HAD this culture for two thousand years; respect for these people is a sacred duty," Padre Francisco said during his sermon. "The Church sometimes doesn't want to talk about homosexuality. But this is our church, our town." As he continued, it became clear that Padre Francisco saw the muxes not only as a point of difference for Juchitán, but also as a point of pride. "Juchitán is a city with its problems like any other. But we should serve as an example of tolerance." He ended with a cheer: "Viva Juchitán! Viva San Vicente Ferrer!"

San Vicente Ferrer, Juchitán's patron saint, figures in one legend about the muxes tradition. "They say that God gave San Vicente Ferrer a bag full of homosexuals to distribute throughout Mexico, one in each town," explained Layla López, a professor from Oaxaca and a native of Juchitán I'd hired to help me talk to muxes who spoke only Zapotec, the region's most popular indigenous language. "But when he got to Juchitán, the muxes became too exuberant—they all burst out of the bag here."

Juchitán's muxes were certainly exuberant after the Saturday morning mass, the start of the vela. Streaming outside, they lined up behind a standard-bearer holding a sequined flag that depicted a figure half man (in a sombrero) and half woman (in the local traje, an embroidered skirt and top). Behind him were the mothers of the muxes, muxes in traditional dress, muxes in spandex tops and miniskirts (one of them holding a Chihuahua in a pink jockey's cap), and muxes dressed as men.

The spectacle seemed to delight—but not surprise—the Juchitecos. For the most part, Juchitán >

'On the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, every family considers it a blessing to have one gay son,' she said. 'While daughters marry and leave home, a muxe cares for his parents in their old age'



Felina, a hairdresser and former queen of the vela.



Oscar Cazorlas, a jeweler who founded the festival nearly 30 years ago.

is a nondescript town: crowded streets lined with modern two-story buildings housing restaurants and cluttered storefronts. But the market, in the colonial center of town, is entirely different—a vibrant, cacophonous, colorful, mainly female world, where women (and muxes) with silk ribbons woven through graying braids call out both insults and invitations to passers-by, hawking food, from live iguanas to fried grasshoppers; flowers to decorate altars, graves, and houses; and elaborately embroidered clothing.

Juchitán's market is, in fact, one of the best places in Mexico to experience the mingling of traditional ethnic groups. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is part of Oaxaca, a state with 16 different ethnic groups that speak 18 different languages; *muxe* is a Zapotec word. The isthmus's isolation has helped indigenous cultures survive, and it's debatable whether the *muxe* tradition could have endured in another part of the country. The same is true for the culture of the Tehuantepec women, who are so admired for their strength that non-Tejuanans, such as Frida Kahlo, have often adopted their style of dress.

The day of the post-mass parade, many muxes wore the local *traje*. But not the person at the center of it all, Oscar Cazorlas, who created the society of the Intrépidas and the *vela* almost 30 years ago. A jeweler, Oscar wore heavy gold chains and Aztec-style pendants over a white guayabera and black pants. "I don't dress as a woman," he told me. "I dress much more expensively."

Before the *vela*, I'd caught up with Oscar and several of "the girls," as he calls them, at the house he shares with his 80-year-old mother. Among them were Armando, Oscar's cousin, and a teacher originally from Puebla who was dressed as a man but answered to the female name of Camelia.

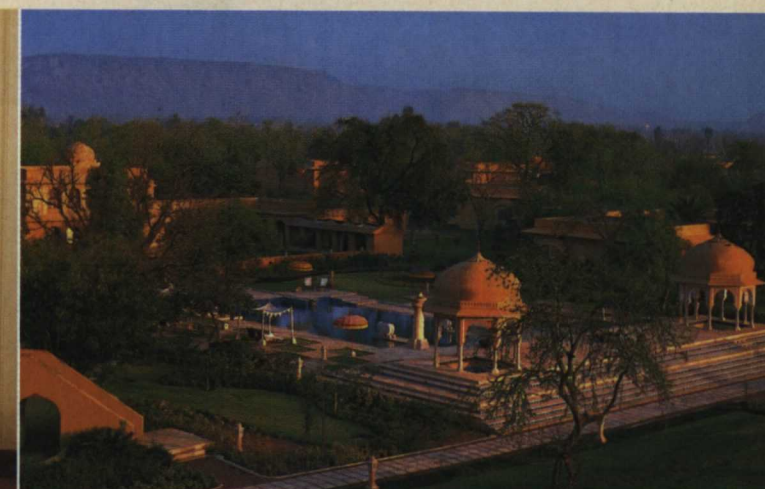
"The Intrépidas accepted me, with all their enthusiasm," said Camelia, who was queen of the *vela* in 2003. "That's why I moved here." With the zeal of a convert, Camelia instructed me: "This is what you should write. 'In a little corner of Oaxaca, on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a gay movement started.'" He waved his hand with a flourish.

The others laughed at his dramatic delivery. But as they showed me photos of muxes at a political rally with the governor, and at another for Amaranta, a one-armed transvestite who ran for Congress and lost by a narrow margin, it became clear that the muxes' visibility was slowly growing.

"Muxes are respected here because it's a matriarchal society," Camelia continued. »

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"There's no such thing," Armando, a Juchitán native, snapped. "Tejuanas have the same problems as women everywhere, but their role is more important, because they've always made their own money selling things in the market."

THE MUXES I MET CERTAINLY play important, and visible, roles within their community. Pedro, a soft-spoken weaver who invited me into the dirt courtyard of his house, helps support his family by making gorgeous embroideries on black velvet

for *trajes* that women wear at special events. José, who carried a plastic purse and confided to me that he was depressed because his boyfriend had married a woman and wouldn't see him anymore, is a candlemaker. A tiny man called Mauro showed me around his workshop, where he makes papier-mâché animals and paper flowers for parade floats, *velas*, and weddings. He has helped decorate the *Intrépidas' vela*, but doesn't attend it. "It's too showy," he said in Zapotec. Later Layla told me, "There are two kinds of muxes. Mauro is close to 50—at that age, his type, they're not transvestites, they don't take a girl's name."

The other kind is exemplified by Felina, who owns a successful hair salon and dress shop in Juchitán. Layla's mother taught Felina when she was a schoolboy named Ángel. Now Felina dresses as a woman and is treated as such. Tall and slim, she was queen of the *Intrépidas* in 1998, and photos of her triumph decorate the acid-green walls of her salon. She is also a member of the muxé basketball team, which competes in a tournament the week preceding the *vela*. "We play other gay >>

At the festival ball there were muxes in traditional *trajes*, ball gowns, and miniskirts, as well as former queens of the *vela* in costumes: flamenco dancer, La Señorita Ecológica



Venecia, wearing the traditional local *traje*.

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The festival's Sunday afternoon party, left. Below: Juchitán's church of San Vicente Ferrer.



The Facts

Juchitán's closest airport is Salina Cruz; Aeromar flies there from Mexico City. Susana Trilling leads culinary tours to Juchitán and the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (52-951/508-0044; seasons@spersaoaxaca.com.mx); last year she also led a cultural tour to Juchitán for the Vela of the Intrépidas.

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teams, and sometimes male teams," Felina said, highlighting the muxes' perception of themselves as a third gender.

The climax of the festival is the ball on Saturday night. "Everybody dresses their best, very glamorous," Felina said, adding that her clients "have to be very good girlfriends for me to help them get ready, because I'm getting dressed myself." That night, among a crowd of 2,000 creating a fire hazard in the fuchsia-colored concrete bunker known as the Salón Princesa, I understood Felina's need for concentration: each muxe clearly strives for the most attention-getting ensemble. There were muxes in trajes, ball gowns, and miniskirts and thigh-high boots—some of them with prosthetic breasts and one with very real-looking implants. Former queens wore over-the-top costumes: Camelia was dressed as a flamenco dancer; Zita, in a green gown adorned with peacock feathers, was La Señorita Ecológica, with three live iguanas attached to her hair.

Dancing with them were their families and friends. One teenage girl tapped my shoulder and asked, "Do you mind if I take a picture of you?" I couldn't understand why she would waste film on me when there was a transvestite with three live iguanas on her head nearby. Then I realized that in Juchitán, a blonde in a traje and a floral headpiece was a more unusual sight than either a man in drag or a live iguana. After a series of presentations, Juchitán's mayor, Héctor Matus, crowned this year's queen and spoke: "We Juchitecos respect our male

friends who have different preferences," he said, while a marching band of 12-year-olds played.

The next afternoon, Felina wore a traje, as all cross-dressing muxes do for the closing ceremony. This was a much smaller event, the highlight of which was transfer of responsibility between the outgoing and incoming sponsors of the vela. As the groups paraded, the bandleader said a few words: "Thanks to God and to the people of Juchitán for allowing us the freedom to walk down the street. And remember, there's still a long way to go."

In most of Mexico, acceptance of homosexuality is a modern idea. But in Tehuantepec, the existence—and acceptance—of muxes is an age-old tradition of the Zapotec culture, one that's suddenly become current. Lately, the Intrépidas' vela has inspired others, such as the Festival of the Crazy Moon of Oaxaca. And one of Mexico's government-sponsored gay community centers was slated to open in Juchitán this year.

"Muxes from other parts of the country, like Camelia, come to Juchitán because it's more open," Layla told me. The vela is a celebration of this openness, unusual not only in Mexico, but in much of the world. As the bandleader said on Saturday night, "For two days we welcome people into our fantasy. We don't want New York or Paris. Our heaven is here." +

ELENI N. GAGE is an editor at People magazine and the author of *North of Ithaka* (St. Martin's Press).



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