



THE WEAVERS' SONGS / HILANDO SONES



STUDY GUIDE

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The Weaver's Songs

In San Pedro Amuzgos, Oaxaca, Mexico—known as "the town of the spinners"—director Ismael Vásquez Bernabé returns to the community that shaped him. As a child, Vásquez Bernabé would lie under his mother's loom and ponder life beyond his own existence in his small town. Now, as an adult, he follows this curiosity by focusing three key figures of the community. Donato, a recently deceased legendary violinist; his son Lorenzo, who is attempting to uphold his father's legacy; and his own mother, Zoila, the only one of her sisters who still practices the art of weaving. Through these intertwined tales of music, dance, and tradition, the film explores the delicate threads that connect generations and the vital role of preserving cultural practices essential to the survival of an indigenous community. "It's up to us who remain to rescue the cloth on the loom."

About Oaxaca and San Pedro Amuzgos

Oaxaca is a state in southern Mexico. It borders Puebla and Veracruz to the north, Guerrero to the west, and Chiapas to the east. To the south it borders the Pacific Ocean. A large percentage of the state is mountainous. Its capital city is Oaxaca de Juárez, also called Oaxaca. This state has a population of about 4 million people. A significant percentage of them are indigenous. There are sixteen official indigenous groups. Many people believe that Oaxaca is the most ethnically diverse state in Mexico.

San Pedro Amuzgos is in the southwestern part of Oaxaca. According to Data Mexico, the most recent population estimate was 6,632 people. It finds that the majority of the town's inhabitants (4,495) speak Amuzgo, which is an indigenous dialect. The website also reports that 42.3% of the San Pedro Amuzgos population is classified as being in moderate poverty and 43.3% are in extreme poverty. The Amuzgos are one of many indigenous groups in Mexico, and lives mainly along the coasts of Oaxaca and the state of Guerrero.

Huipil

A huipil is a loose-fitting tunic that is worn by many indigenous women in Mexico, and has existed since well before the arrival of the Spanish. It is a comfortable option in the country's hot and humid climate. The huipil is short-sleeved or sleeveless, and its length varies. It is made by joining together two or three pieces of fabric, with an opening for the head and arms. Most are decorated with embroidery or woven design, with the designs varying by community. Most women own several for everyday wear, and a special two or three for formal occasions. The huipil is traditionally made on a backstrap loom, and typically takes months to make.

Backstrap Loom

The backstrap loom has been used all over the world for years, including throughout Mexico. It is made of wood and rope, and has a strap that attaches around the waist of the weaver. It attaches to a tree or some other type of post, which gives it tension and stability. The width of

the piece of cloth that is produced depends on how far the weaver can reach, but lengthwise, there is less restriction and very long pieces can be produced. It can be time-consuming to set up a piece of weaving on the loom, but one benefit is that this loom is very portable, letting the weaver work from almost anywhere. For example, they can work outside while watching their children, or can take it to a neighbor's house. Weaving in Mexico is traditionally done by women.

Violin

The violin is an important part of music and culture in many parts of Mexico. This instrument originated in Europe, but it was brought to Mexico by the Spanish, where the indigenous people adapted it to their music. It has become an integral part of many musical styles in Mexico. Traditionally, the violin has been played by men, with women more likely to sing, however, in recent years it has become more common for women to play the violin too.

Maize

Maize is believed to have originated in Mexico, and it is one of the country's most important crops. Many different varieties are grown in Oaxaca, and they are a staple part of most people's diets, used to create a variety of different traditional foods. Families and communities typically grow maize in small plots. In many cases, they combine it with other plants such as squash and beans, since these crops complement each other and improve overall growth. The digging stick is one traditional tool for cultivating maize. Farmers use it to dig holes, into which they place maize seeds. The stick can also be used for weeding. The film shows the entire life cycle of the milpa, or maize field, from clearing around the new maize shoots to harvesting the dried ears of corn at the end.

All Saints Day and Day of the Dead

The Day of the Dead and All Saints Day are generally celebrated in Mexico on November 1 and 2. These days are a time to remember those people who have passed away. It is believed that on these days, the souls of the dead come back to visit the living. Many people set up offerings, such as favorite foods and flowers to welcome the souls back. Marigolds are common because they are believed to attract the souls of the dead.

Study Questions

1. What is the role of family in passing down skills like playing the violin and weaving, as shown in the film?
2. What role does the community play in helping to pass these traditions down?
3. As revealed in the film, what are some obstacles to learning the violin?
4. One of the men in the film says that he wants to save his community's musical traditions. What are the benefits of doing so?
5. How do the women in this community learn to weave, as shown in the film?
6. What role do community celebrations play in preserving traditions, as shown in the film?
7. According to the film, how does technology help a community preserve its traditions?
8. How do you think a community can be harmed by losing its traditions?

Additional Resources

- Kirsten Appendini, "Tracing the Maize-Tortilla Chain," UN Chronicle.
<https://www.un.org/en/chronicle/article/tracing-maize-tortilla-chain>
- Data Mexico, "San Pedro Amuzgos."
www.economia.gob.mx/datamexico/en/profile/geo/san-pedro-amuzgos
- Data Mexico, "Oaxaca."
www.economia.gob.mx/datamexico/en/profile/geo/oaxaca-oa
- History.com, "Day of the Dead (Día de los Muertos)," updated October 3, 2024.
<https://www.history.com/topics/halloween/day-of-the-dead>
- Mathew Sandoval and Casey Kuhn, "What is Día de Los Muertos? An Expert Explains the Holiday Celebrating Loved Ones Who Have Died," PBS, November 1, 2023.
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/what-is-dia-de-los-muertos-an-expert-explains-the-holiday-celebrating-loved-ones-who-have-died>
- John Schmal, "Oaxaca: A Land of Amazing Diversity," Indigenous Mexico.
www.indigenousemexico.org/articles/oaxaca-a-land-of-amazing-diversity

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