

Building a Community Museum in Santo Tomas Ocotepec, Mexico



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Project Overview

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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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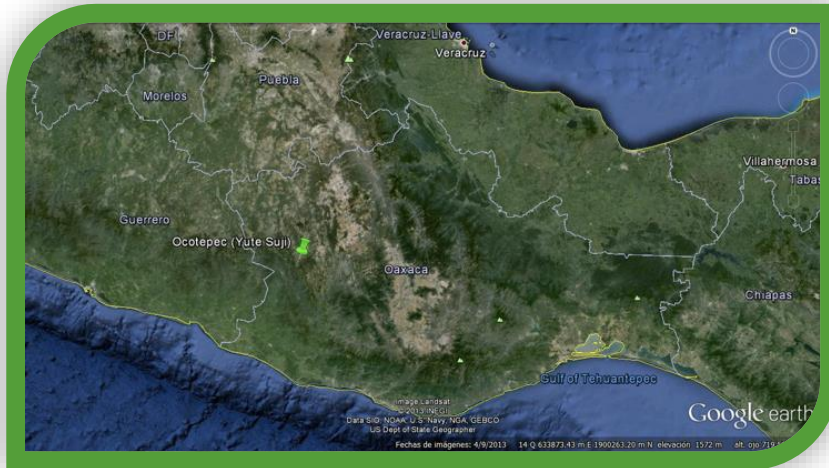
Fellowship Overview

Land conflicts, change of identity and environmental degradation are some of the main problems affecting the Mixtec community of Santo Tomas Ocotepec (STO) in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. In 2007, the municipal government and general population's interest in the community's history and culture was sparked with the "rediscovery" of a 1570s map (called a "Lienzo" in Spanish) that had been forgotten about in the municipal archives. This rare document shows the original boundaries of the municipal territory at the beginning of the colonial period and situates said boundaries through 25 pictograms.

With the intention of preserving their cultural heritage, some members of the community started collecting a series of archeological objects, documents, pictures and texts with the end goal of building a community museum or "Casa de la Cultura". This would be a place where the community would protect and promote their local history and traditions through workshops, museum exhibits and excursions to sacred places. The objective of the project is to preserve and promote Mixtec culture through the collaboration of the municipal government, schools and other key actors interested in developing a community museum. Over the summer of 2016 and December 2016, I worked on establishing the basis of the project with the community. Moreover, I studied the 1570s Lienzo and the historical context in which it was produced with the support and direction of my supervisors, Professor Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert and, of course, with the help of the community of Santo Tomas Ocotepec. Community members gave me access to their oral history in order to match the legends with the sacred places represented on the Lienzo. The aim of the research was to adapt the results into a course for local high school students during the month of December. During the course, we studied and researched the significance of the Lienzo in the history of the community. Through the course, I provided the students with basic research tools they can use to develop the content for the community museum. Furthermore, we did several excursions to the places that are represented in this ancient document with the intention of developing a sense of belonging and appreciation of the cultural and natural richness of Santo Tomas Ocotepec. Beyond the course my hope is to create opportunities for the community youth, not only to value their culture, but to value who they are and to realize how much they can achieve.

Objectives

My goal in life is to improve indigenous education in Mexico. This passion stems from having personal ties to Santo Tomás de Ocotepec, as my stepmother is from the community and my brother and baby sister are Métis. I want them to have the same kind of opportunities growing up as I did. The traditional Mexican curriculum does not take into account relevant subjects for Indigenous communities. For example, sometimes students study urban problems like air



pollution instead of rural ones like river contamination. I have taught courses at the community's secondary and high school and my approach has been very different: all the topics that I teach are based on local problems that

can be solved through the use of historic knowledge, research and science. In an effort to improve Indigenous education, it is essential to find appropriate pedagogical approaches that will motivate students to learn and reflect.

Santo Tomás de Ocotepec is a community located in the region of the "Mixteca Alta" of the Oaxaca Sierra in Mexico. The region is also known to experience one of the highest degrees of governmental negligence in the country. The province of Oaxaca has one of the lowest levels of life expectancy (70.1 years for men and 76 years for women), education (5.5 years), and income (50.1% of population are living in extreme poverty) in the country and most of the local economy depends on subsistence agriculture. Despite this, Oaxaca is the most culturally rich and diverse province in Mexico. Communities in Oaxaca organize themselves based on a mix of modern forms of government and the traditional concept of "usos y costumbres", which is when communities follow the constitution while adhering to their traditions and values. For this reason, the general population is directly involved in municipal government decisions and projects.

Previous Collaboration with the Community

I have been close to the community of Santo Tomás Ocotepec for the past seven years. Since my first year at McGill, I have been spending my summers in the community and implementing different programs related to education. I have previously worked with the municipal government and the local schools. We maintain very good relationships and they have always been very supportive in the implementation of the programs I have led.

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For the past three years, I have led the implementation of two programs in Santo Tomás Ocotepec, in collaboration with the municipal government, local middle school, local high school and the McGill Spanish and Latin American Student Association (SLASA). The first, called BiciClub, aims to reduce the commuting time of secondary students by providing them with bikes. More than just offering bikes to students, BiciClub involves teaching the whole school how to ride bikes and how to repair them. To make the project as sustainable as possible, we provided the school with tools and bike parts for the students and created a bike work shop.

The second project was an environmental education course at the local high school that we called Naketaaó, which means “encounters” in Mixtec. Mixtec is the language spoken in this region. During this course we studied the relationship between the local river, humans and the environment. The objective of the course was to give students hands-on activities in which they could put science into practice. For instance, using mathematics to calculate the amount of water the river discharged and its variations through time. Biology was used to study the organisms that lived in the river that can be used as bio-indicators to assess water quality and the “health” of the river. Finally, chemistry was used to analyze the level of oxygen, pH and nitrogen in the water and understand the impact of agrochemicals used in the water streams. Through this method, it was possible to adapt the activities to the curriculum at the same time that we showed a practical side of science and developed a different understanding of environmental consciousness.

2016 Project and Course

Developing a community museum requires completing a set of important steps. The first thing I had to do was to learn as much as I could about the Mixtec culture so that I could understand the Lienzo of Santo Tomás Ocotepec, which would become the main artifact of the museum. My history professor and advisor, Daviken Studnicki-Gizbert, taught me the general historical framework and foundational concepts like territoriality which were the basis for me to understand the importance of the Lienzo within the territorial history of Mexico.

The second step consisted of analyzing the Lienzo. I was able to find two previous studies of the Lienzo done in the 60s and 70s, which highly informed my research and provided me with a basis of interpretation of the document that I would not have been able to decipher by myself. My research consisted of relating the pictograms of the Lienzo



with the oral history of the community. The previous studies focused on interpreting the

pictograms on the Lienzo and identifying the names of the places represented there. The Lienzo is a map in which several sacred places are represented. The stories behind these sacred places are still present in the community's oral history. The objective of all this research was to develop a course for the high school students in which they would learn basic research skills with the intention of preparing them to conduct their own research in the future and contribute to the creation of content for the community museum. Through a deductive approach, students took the roles of archeologists, anthropologists and historians and had to develop individual interpretations of the document by conducting research in their own community. The course was accompanied with a series of excursions to the sacred places with the intention of showing the cultural and natural richness of the community to the majority of the students, some of whom do not even know the extent of their municipality. This first completed phase of the project is the basis for the creation of the Casa de la Cultura (community museum), in which the collaboration of the local schools is essential as well as the motivation of the students in furthering their knowledge about their own culture.

Activities

The objective of the courses that I taught was to provide students with reasoning and practical tools that will help them analyze and solve everyday life problems. I focused on the process analysis and problem solving. My objective is to form historians able to conduct their own research and answer their own questions.



The first part of the program consisted of studying the Lienzo. At the beginning of the lesson I put the 30 students that registered for the course in a situation. I told them to imagine that they were archeologists and that they had discovered the Lienzo of Santo Tomas Ocotepec after more than 100 years of it being hidden in the archives. Given that the document had never been studied before, they needed to decipher the hidden mysteries of this ancient

document through close observation and thus that it was up to them to interpret the document and its meaning.

I provided scaffolding for the students by guiding their thoughts through some questions in which they needed to justify their answers in groups of two or three students. The students loved this activity and actively participated. Through this activity the students were able to come up with several interpretations, like the fact that the document was a map drawn by a Mixtec after the Spanish conquest.

They then needed to categorize the different elements of the map (pictograms). They needed to think about whether the pictogram was purely Mixtec, like the pyramid, or Spanish, like the Church, or a mix of both. At the end of this exercise, the students needed to make an interpretation (hypothesis) about one of the Lienzo's pictograms with the objective of conducting their own research and finding the meaning and oral history behind the pictogram.

The second part of the course consisted of helping the students design methodology to conduct their own research, by helping them prepare a series of recorded interviews to interpret the oral history behind the pictograms. With their research proposal finalized, the students went and conducted several interviews with different members of the community.

With their findings the students needed to write a report and give an explanation of the pictogram they chose. Once they had completed the interviews and synthesized the information, they gathered and created a scrapbook with all their findings. After the students finished their scrapbook pages we presented the students' work to the Municipal authorities and the school director, who allowed us to have access to the original Lienzo.

The visit to the community archives was a very special opportunity for me and the students because we were able to see the original document that we spent so much time studying. It was a very organic way to recapitulate everything that we had learnt during the course.



Throughout the course we also took several field trips to the different places that were represented on the Lienzo:

- Pyramid and church

- Yute Suji – sacred river
- Cuquila community and archaeological site
- Caves – an important part of Mixtec culture
- Yucuiti mountain village



Context

As a consequence of epidemics, Indigenous commoners did not face the need to obtain titles to their lands, since there were vast amounts of free land. Thus by the 1560s, Indigenous peoples kept relying on oral tradition to allocate land rights. From the mid-seventeenth century onwards, progressive population and economic growth increased the pressure over land that led to an increase of conflicts around territorial limits. In the seventeenth century a land policy known as "composición", took force. "Composición" allowed the legalization of land titles. In order to receive these titles, Indigenous people needed to prove their claims over their land. To claim their territories, native people started to produce maps and pictorial documents to show their rights to water and land. These documents were known as primordial titles: they showed the boundaries of the native holdings and sometimes they were based on pre-Hispanic documents that represented the lineage of the community rulers. These documents proved that the territory belonged to the community, and gave Indigenous peoples the right to unify and receive their titles. The Lienzo of Santo Tomas Ocotepec is the primordial title of the community and the oldest proof the community holds of their right to the land. This document shows a hybrid documentation system between Indigenous and Spaniards to organize the territory. In the Lienzo, the territory boundaries are represented by pictograms and are accompanied with a Spanish translation, to allow Spanish authorities to interpret the document's meaning.

Interviews with Community Leaders

Through a long series of questions and interviews to more than 50 people I was able to record, analyze and share the legends of the people with the students and other members of the community. At the beginning of the interview process I randomly interviewed people that were walking in the community and were willing to participate in the interview (convenience sampling). When I engaged with someone on the street, I asked them if they could participate in a small interview to learn about their opinion on the history of the community. Once they agreed I asked the following question: "Tell me the history of your community from the beginning to the end, in the way you may prefer and with as much detail as you can remember". Most of the people felt very confused by the question and were not able to answer it. I realized that they were not sure what was expected of them and told me that they did not know anything about the history of the community.

From all the people that I asked I was able to interview five people before finally giving up on this approach. Those that answered gave very short stories and talked about things that were unrelated to the history of the community. In one occasion I asked the grandparents of my step-mother the same question in Mixtec. The grandfather, who we call Tata, talked for about 20

minutes in Mixtec. I know that he talked about the reason for which the village is called Ocotepec, but I have been unable to translate it from Mixtec to either Spanish or English. Access to information will be a challenge for the research project because most often those that held most of the culture and history are those that never learned Spanish.

With the help of the students that were taking the course, I was able to identify 28 potential community trendsetters and the place where they live. The way I got the following list was by asking students who they would go ask to if they would need to know more about the history of their community. Some of these people were interviewed by the students and helped them with their research.

Interviews with Students

The second approach consisted of asking structured questions to people in the community and the students through the use of semi-structured questions. I interviewed 20 students with five semi-structured questions, including “describe the life of the Mixtecs before the arrival of the Spaniards,” and “what changed with the arrival of the Spaniards?”

Challenges and Successes

After this experience I realized there are no real successes without challenges. If something is easy is not a real success. The most challenging success I had was to adapt the academic content that I learned through my research into activities that I could do with the students. Most of my research was very academic in nature. The creation of the activities and material was very time consuming, because I had to start from scratch, since no one has done anything similar in the past. My dilemma consisted in teaching important, but sometimes abstract concepts while making it engaging, interesting and fun in order to maintain the number of students that participated in the activities. Throughout the course I was able to keep a large group of students that voluntarily made part of the program. Another was to keep my promises. At the beginning I promised the students that we were going to see the original document, but it was not easy. To get access to the original document we needed to obtain permission from the Municipal President. To convince the President, we showed him our findings as well as all the effort we put in, and he finally agreed to give us access.

Even if I have been going to the community for many years I had never been by myself (without close friends or family) for long periods of time. At the beginning I was nervous since it was all up to me. Being by myself was probably the best part because it allowed me to create a deep connection with many members of the community, and it allowed me to feel as a member of the community for the first time. I think that I finally gained the trust of the community, that valued my long commitment with the school and the students. I knew that they liked me, but after this experience they trusted me.

Questions Raised

At the end of the program my main concern was to know how we were going to finish the community museum and how to make this museum come alive. The main issue with community museums often is that after a while they get forgotten and nobody really visits them anymore. The community has the idea of making this space into something more than a museum. They want to create a center for elders to be respected and valued for their knowledge. Sometimes elders live in harsh conditions because they are old and cannot work the land anymore. Occasionally they suffer from neglect. The community is concerned about this issue and will make sure that the museum is a comfortable space for the vulnerable members of society, in which they are going to be valued for their knowledge and not for their productivity. I was concerned about the future of the community, but now I know that even if it is not easy the community is working to solve their problems as they have always done. At the beginning I thought that their culture was threatened, but in reality, their culture and their values are still present and thriving.

Training and Mentoring

Daviken was a unique mentor. He supported me before and after the fellowship. He guided me and allowed me to see the big picture of land issues. At the beginning I was focusing only on the Lienzo, but Daviken showed me why the Lienzo and the documents like these ones were so important in the History of Latin America. He gave me the conceptual framework that I needed to understand the research that I was doing. Without him it would not have been possible.

Community Implications and Further Work

The community museum will provide a space for the community to come together and value their culture and traditions. The community museum will also provide a physical space in which workshops on different topics could take place, thus strengthening community relationships. Santo Tomas Ocotepec has defined a set of objectives to achieve by 2020. The overarching hope of these objectives is that Ocotepec will be a place in which their traditional way of dressing, language, music, medicine and communal organization is preserved.

This project is a complex task since it requires long-term and sustained collaboration of the community that will be in charge of creating the museum. During my stay a new Municipal President was elected and he started his term in January 2017. The new government created a new office that will be in charge of cultural projects like the community museum. This is very good news as there is a new minister of culture in the community who will be directly responsible of organizing cultural events.