

*Amate for Sale: Indigenous Mexican Painters in Global Art Markets*

Tyler Cowen  
Department of Economics  
George Mason University  
Fairfax VA 22030  
tcowen@gmu.edu

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Note that I spell the artists' names as they do, which in some cases means leaving off the diacritical marks that one would otherwise expect in Spanish. The artists are familiar with these marks, and have made conscious decisions not to use them. I also tell the story from the vantage point of 2001, the most focused year of my research, when relating ages and chronology.

What happens when poor, Nahuatl-speaking Mexican artists enter global art markets? What choices do they face? What is required for them to succeed? I will trace the lives of several Mexican painters -- three of them brothers -- with a focus on the dynamics of economic development and the globalization of culture.

The protagonists:

### **Marcial Camilo Ayala**

Marcial was born in San Agustin Oapan, a small and remote Mexican village in Guerrero, populated by indigenous Nahuas. Since the 1960s most households have been involved in producing "amate" (bark paper) paintings, and ceramics, for sustenance.

Marcial is the leading amate painter in the region and the only family member who is fully literate. Born in 1951, Marcial taught himself Spanish in his early twenties, working from a Spanish-Nahuatl dictionary. He used the Carlos Castaneda "Don Juan" books -- still favorites of his -- as his reading text. Marcial reads voraciously, at least when he has free time from art and from village politics, and when his diabetes condition does not interfere. He has read Dante's Divine Comedy, twice, and several times has painted his vision of the Inferno, Purgatory, and Paradise. He has painted the cave allegory from Plato's Republic as well. Marcial loves Beethoven (his favorite), Mozart, Dvorak, and Bach. Marcial is a political leader in Oapan, in part because of his eloquence at town meetings, and is a strong advocate for the rights of indigenous cultures.

Marcial admires Renaissance art, Picasso, the Mexican muralists, the Mexican surrealists (especially Remedios Varro), Henri Rousseau, and Haitian Naïve art. His paintings and amates reflect these influences, as he has gone the furthest beyond the original artistic traditions of the pueblo. For many years he has worked on both his technical proficiency and his ability to innovate conceptually.

Marcial is the only family member who has been to the United States. He has visited Santa Fe (several times), Miami, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Washington, sometimes in connection with art exhibits, once for a television program with Kevin Costner about indigenous peoples (Five Hundred Nations, produced in Los Angeles), and once to consult for the Smithsonian Institution (Washington).

Marcial now lives in Cuernavaca, where he has a studio for painting. His wife and four children live in nearby Taxco. In the summer and fall he spends time in Oapan working in the fields and doing odd jobs, such as protecting his crops against rampaging local animals. He claims that fieldwork brings him closer to nature and keeps his inspiration fresh for painting.

Though Marcial will claim to be shy, he has the personality of a natural leader. His long time North American friend, Florence Browne, cites lack of fear as his strongest and most memorable personal quality.<sup>1</sup>

Marcial's work enjoyed a burst of attention in the mid- to late 1970s, but it had been neglected for many years. But recently interest has grown. The Smithsonian decided to include at least one amate in the forthcoming opening exhibit of the Museum of the American Indian (which will include Mexico), scheduled to open on the Mall in Washington. Amates had two shows in France in 2002, were included in several New York City art shows, and were exhibited at Ramapo College, in New Jersey.

### **Juan Camilo Ayala**

Juan Camilo, older brother of Marcial, still lives in the pueblo. Unlike Marcial, Juan is not fully fluent in Spanish. He works every year in the fields for several months, harvesting the family crop. In his extra time, and during the winter months, he paints on amate paper and board. Juan is quiet and soft-spoken, yet powerful in effect, carrying the

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<sup>1</sup> Florence Browne is an elderly American retiree in Cuernavaca. She has known Marcial for over twenty years and was the first person to write an article about him.

air of an influential and benevolent pater familias. He has five surviving children, all of whom he has taught, or is teaching, how to paint.

Juan prefers to stay at home, though he sometimes travels to Oaxaca or Puerto Escondido for a month or two to sell his artworks, usually to North Americans and Europeans. His life consists of hard work, his art, and time spent with family. In his free time he enjoys walking around the nearby countryside and envisioning scenes to paint. He has maintained a traditional artistic style, and almost always paints the pueblo, a fiesta, or a nearby landscape, typically using a celebratory style. Unlike the others, he has never painted “sueños” [his dreams], as his brothers refer to works of the imagination.

Juan, like Marcial, adheres to an extreme work ethic. After a hard day of work in the fields he is still able to come home and concentrate on his painting.

### **Felix Camilo Ayala**

Felix Camilo, the youngest of the three painting brothers at forty-five years old, also lives in the pueblo. His wife died of fever five years ago, so he is solely responsible for raising a family of seven children. He is very protective and loving of his family. He comes across as sad and world weary, although his friends claim he was very different before his wife's illness.

He spends most of his time at home, and works in the fields only rarely. Most of Felix's artwork is now on a small scale. He paints amates and small pieces on board, typically of the 12” by 12” size, as much for his own pleasure as for sale. Given that the amates and paintings no longer yield much of a living, he concentrates his time on painting pottery and laminated crosses, typically for street sale to tourists in Taxco, Cuernavaca, and Acapulco. Unlike with Marcial and Juan, doing the highest quality of art does not seem very important to him. Marcial and Juan think of themselves as artists, in a very self-conscious manner, but Felix still thinks of himself as a craftsman or a village artisan, and indeed appears more comfortable with this self-image. When he shows his art, it is

almost with apology, whereas for Marcial and Juan it is more an act of boasting and self-congratulation.

Felix, the last of the trio to start painting, has always felt the shadow of the other brothers and has been reluctant to compete on their terms. Felix's talent nonetheless has won recognition. When the group was given a large show in Connecticut in 1981, Felix Camilo was represented more prominently than any other group member.

Felix is quiet and does not show obvious charisma. Yet he is keenly intelligent, has a strong sense of irony, and his advice is valued greatly by his friends. He gets along with just about everybody, is removed from village politics, and is universally considered to be sweet.

### **Inocencio Jimenez Chino, Felix Jimenez Chino, Roberto Mauricio Salazar, and Abraham Mauricio Salazar**

Along with the Camilo brothers, these two pairs of brothers are considered the artistic leaders of San Agustín. For a number of years they formed a “collaborative circle” with the Camilos, painting for foreign clients under the tutelage of Ed Rabkin, a North American supporter of the group.

### **The pueblo: San Agustín Oapan**

San Agustín Oapan lies in the center of the Mexican state of Guerrero, along the Rio Balsas. The pueblo is 500-600 meters above sea level, where the terrain is mountainous, extremely dry, has many canyons, large cactuses, some deciduous trees, and a large amount of scrub. The village has three to four thousand people in the rainy season, when the crops are planted, and many fewer otherwise.<sup>2</sup>



The pueblo consists almost exclusively of private homes. Oapan has no hotels, restaurants, or full size stores to speak of, though there are several one-room cantinas, a few outdoor commercial stalls, and several homes that devote a few shelves of space to canned goods and local foodstuffs. The other large-scale structures are not commercial in nature. A large Catholic church in an open plaza marks the center of town, and (roughly) divides the pueblo into two barrios. On one side of the plaza is the comisario "town government" building, containing both town hall and two small jail cells. On the other side of the square is a bus stop with the name of the town painted on a small sign, and an elevated building, which visiting priests use to rest and to store their materials. It is built on top of a small pre-Hispanic pyramid, many of whose stones remain visible underneath the more modern structure.

The name of the village reflects its cross-cultural heritage. The first two words of the pueblo's name, San Agustín, date from the sixteenth century, when the Augustinian religious order homesteaded the religious loyalties of numerous Mexican villages. The third word, Oapan, predates the conquest, and means "where the green maize stalk abounds" in Nahuatl, the native language. The villagers often refer simply to "Oapan," rather than using the full name of the pueblo.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See Good (1993, p.145) for the sea level estimate and for the population estimate (p.63). Many individuals are formal residents but spend little time in the pueblo, so the true population is difficult to estimate.

<sup>3</sup> Nahuatl still has over one million speakers, most of whom are located in central Mexico. Classical Nahuatl was formerly the lingua franca of the Aztec empire. Many Nahuatl words are long, full of mellifluous syllables, and replete with sounds approximating our sh and tl. The vocabulary is rich and sophisticated, and believed by the villagers to be superior to Spanish. "Ki:xteyo:tia" means "he paints eyes on it," which refers to the last stage of painting an amate or picture. "Xtihkoto:naskeh" means "we will not snap the cord," or more metaphorically "we will not give up growing corn." "To:naka:yo:tl" is used to refer to corn; it means both "our sustenance" and "that which results from the heat of the sun." The word Nahuatl itself means "clear speech. I learned the word for "painting the eyes on" from Inocencio Chino, with assistance from Jonathan Amith. For the other words I have drawn from Good (1993, pp.180-1), as amended by correspondence with Jonathan Amith. Amith's method of writing Nahuatl uses the colon to indicate vowel length. Classical Nahuatl offers such gems as "icnocuicatl," which means "chants of orphanhood and deep reflection"; see León-Portilla and Shorris (2001, p.30). They provide the etymology for "Nahuatl" as well, see pp.81, 661. Karttunen (1983) provides an analytical dictionary of classical Nahuatl. The dialect of Nahuatl spoken in Oapan is closely related to classical Nahuatl, though speakers of the two would not find each other mutually intelligible in every regard. Jonathan Amith, who is currently

San Agustín Oapan is part of a larger ethnic community. Along the Rio Balsas fifteen small pueblos share a broadly common micro-culture, made up of about 35,000 individuals, known as "Alto Balsas Nahuatl." San Agustín is the historic center of these communities, the oldest pueblo of the group, and still the largest. It is the home base for our larger story about markets and globalization.

The central questions of this book concern three main areas: economic development, cultural economics, and cultural globalization. Let us consider each in turn.

### Economic development

The story of the group, and the broader story of amate painting, is a microcosm of successful economic development. The amate and crafts merchants have succeeded through intense training, investment in unique, non-replicable skills, marketing to outsiders, and the cultivation of trade networks. The residents of Oapan have developed a "cluster of creativity" to drive their development. Michael Porter (1998), in his Competitive Advantage of Nations, cited such clusters as critical to the economic success of advanced nations; the Japanese electronics industry, Italian shoemaking, or Swiss pharmaceuticals are classic examples.

A similar logic of spatial concentration applies to the developing world, perhaps to a greater extreme. We commonly find in Mexico (and many other parts of the world) that a single art form will be found in one village, or a small number of villages, and nowhere else. This geographic clustering implies that the underlying conditions for creativity are fragile, but also that small communities can be extremely dynamic. The history of the arts in Oapan shows both tendencies, and offers a case study in the rise and fall of a successful cluster.

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assembling a dictionary of Nahuatl in Oapan, estimates that the difference is comparable to that between English in the time of Shakespeare and English today.

This creative cluster has significantly improved the quality of life in Oapan over the last forty years. The extension of the market nexus to the pueblo, rather than impoverishing the community, has provided dramatic and rapid boosts in the standard of living. Whether we look at health, food, transportation, household conveniences, or entertainment, village residents are far better off than they were thirty years ago. Amate painting, and the general growth of trade in Oapan, illustrates the payoffs from successful “indigenous” entrepreneurship.

### Cultural economics

Cultural economics, which has evolved primarily in the United States and Europe, typically focuses on institutions in those countries. It neglects the poorer countries and the special problems (and opportunities) they face in producing and funding their creative outputs.

I also part from mainstream cultural economics by examining what is sometimes called "folk art," "Outsider art" or "Naïve art." Whatever we may take these terms to mean, the creative activities at hand fit neither the model of Western high art, nor the model of Western popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

In the case of amate, we have an art popular in its society, but sold almost exclusively to wealthier outsiders, often to North Americans. Unlike high culture, the amate arts do not have many close or direct links with institutional gatekeepers, such as museums, fundraising networks, government subsidies, and historical scholarship and canonization. In these regards the amate arts resemble folk art. The amate arts, however, are not a mere generic repetition of given themes and techniques, as are many folk arts. Many amate

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<sup>4</sup> I do not like any of these terms, which imply unities that do not exist, or which set these activities beneath high art (as with the term "folk art"). Or the terms define the activity only in a negative way, in terms of an opposition to something else (as with "Outsider art"). For other studies of "folk art" production in Mexico, and its economic aspects, see Cook and Binford (1990) and Goertzen (2001). Barbash (1993) looks at the lives of some Oaxacan woodcarvers, though with very little analysis or detail. Parezo (1983) studies the economics of Navajo sandpainting.

artists produce works of two different kinds: cheaper generic works for immediate sale to uninformed audiences, and higher-quality original creative works, often commissioned in advance, for patrons and better informed clients. Most amate painters have faced the age-old trade-off of pleasing the market, and earning more money, or painting to please themselves.

Amate painting, like so many Mexican commercial enterprises, is organized in terms of the individual artistic entrepreneur and the entrepreneurial family. Amate painters typically do not work through larger firms or cultural organizations.

My investigation therefore uses the medium of economic biography, a neglected method in cultural economics. Economists profess a strong interest in "methodological individualism," but rarely do they take these strictures literally. Many empirical investigations of culture move quickly to larger institutions, such as museums or multinational entertainment corporations. In statistical work economists measure the actions of particular individuals, through panel data sets, but they commonly ignore individual histories and biographies.<sup>5</sup>

Unlike many artistic biographies, I look at failure as well as success. History uses paper trails, which favor well-known artistic episodes from highly literate eras, such as the Italian Renaissance or the French Impressionist painters. In reality most artists do not have their lives recorded on paper and do not achieve widespread celebrity, even when their work is of high quality. This study examines how some lesser-known creators try to survive as artists, and the choices they face in seeking to pursue their art and earn a living. Such a focus illuminates aspects of art markets that a study of Michelangelo or Monet does not.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Giorgio Vasari (1991 [1568]), of course, presented the lives of the painters of the Italian Renaissance, comparing them to each other and seeking to confirm their fame. He pioneered the biographical approach to cultural economics. The comparative biographical approach of this book also points to Plutarch's Parallel Lives, although Plutarch focused more tightly on the questions of what a good life consists of, and whether one must live a philosophically aware life to be virtuous and to enjoy good fortune.

## Cultural globalization

Our story does not concern Mexico alone, but rather looks at the loci of cultural interactions between Mexico and the United States. High-quality amate painting, despite being tightly clustered in four neighboring rural Mexican villages, relies on global markets. North American buyers, patrons, and technologies have been essential to amate since the beginnings of the art in the 1960s. Amate painting, as we know it, would not have existed, nor would it have matured, without the intervention of various outside forces, often disruptive, on the Alto Balsas Nahua communities.

While the amate arts are but a single example, they suggest how an American-Mexican cultural partnership might be a fruitful one, and at least partially supportive of indigenous cultures. Critics typically charge that poorer indigenous societies are corroded or ruined by outside contact with larger and richer societies. Amate markets, a case study in globalization, show how cross-cultural contact, and sometimes the very processes of corrosion, also mobilize creative energies.

The history of amate production does not fit the usual story about how globalization, or cross-cultural exchange, wipes out the artistic production of smaller indigenous societies. Oapan residents tend to look favorably on their contacts with North Americans, which they view as providing a counterweight to the larger national Mexican culture surrounding them. Selling to North Americans has helped them maintain, extend, and preserve their cultural achievements. In essence the very large culture (United States) is helping the very small culture (Oapan) survive against a larger surrounding culture, namely mestizo Mexico.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, the lives of this study illustrate Vasari's (1991, p.4 [1568]) maxim that most artists do not enjoy uninterrupted success but rather are subject to a wheel of Fortune.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Barber (1995) offers a classic account of how larger cultures homogenize the world and wipe out many smaller cultures. See also Jeremy Tunstall (1977, p.57), who defined the cultural imperialism thesis as the view that: "authentic, traditional and local culture in many parts of the world is being battered out of existence by the indiscriminate dumping of large quantities of slick commercial and media products, mainly from the United States." Or Fredric Jameson (2000, p.51), who wrote: "The standardization of world culture, with local popular or traditional forms driven out or dumbed down to make way for American television, American music, food, clothes and films, has been seen by many as the very heart of globalization."

The history of amate illustrates another twist on standard accounts of globalization. Very small cultures, such as Oapan, to realize themselves, often have needed to trade and exchange ideas with their immediate neighbors, namely other very small cultures. Very large external cultures, such as Mexico and the United States, can help them achieve these ends. The spread of high-quality amate painting from Ameyaltepec to Oapan shows this mechanism clearly. The two pueblos are very close together, both in space and in terms of cultural origins. Yet the painting of complex “stories” [historias] spread from one pueblo to the other only in the larger environments of Taxco, Cuernavaca, Acapulco and Mexico City.

The history of amates also suggests it is hard to draw a clear distinction between the forces that preserve indigenous communities and the forces that corrupt them. In this instance contact with the outside world, trading for the amate paper itself (from the San Pablito Indians), transportation to Cuernavaca, and sales to American tourists all mobilized the creative achievements of San Agustín artisans, mostly through the medium of amate. Forces of this kind, however, also led to the subsequent decline of Alto Balsas culture. A ten-hour trip on burro, from the pueblo to the city, has become a three-hour trip in a car or bus. As the citizens of Oapan have had more contact with the outside world, they have taken less care to preserve their native traditions, such as dances and mask making. Social customs have changed or eroded. Many people have left the community, either for larger Mexican cities or for the United States, never to return on a permanent basis. Amate production itself has ended up as largely unprofitable (see chapter six).

Marcial's life reflects these same tensions between freedom and preservation. Marcial, of the three brothers, is by far the most concerned to preserve the traditions of the village. He regards cultural preservation as close to a sacred duty. Yet he has spent most of the last thirty years living outside the village. In the 1970s he lived with Ed Rabkin in Cuernavaca, and in the early 1990s he moved to Taxco, largely because he could not tolerate the isolation, petty politics, and lack of markets in Oapan. In his unguarded

moments he will admit he cannot stand living in the village for any length of time. Marcial subsequently found even Taxco (pop. 52,000) to be too small and too stifling, and he was glad to move back to Cuernavaca in 2001.

Marcial and his brothers also complain that the traditional dances are vanishing. Yet none of the brothers wishes to partake in such dances. They claim it is too much work, too exhausting, and that perfecting the dances involves too much time away from their own commitments, which of course include selling amates to the outside world.

Oapan thus provides one indication of how cross-cultural contact mobilizes the creative fruits of a society before transforming that society beyond recognition. In an earlier work, Creative Destruction: How Globalization is Changing World Culture, I examined this phenomenon more generally and noted a common pattern. An initial meeting of cultures often produces a creative boom, as individuals trade materials, technologies, and new ideas. In many cases a richer culture will hire the creative labor of the poorer culture, and provide financial support for its creations. Temporarily we have the best of both worlds, at least from a cultural point of view. The core of the smaller or poorer culture remains intact, while it benefits from trade and markets its unique worldview. Over time, however, the larger and wealthier culture upsets the creative wellsprings of the poorer culture. The poorer culture is so small, relative to the larger culture, that it cannot remain insulated. The poorer culture ends up more modern, richer, and often better off, but it is also less creative, if only because it is less unique.

The question therefore, is not whether cross-cultural contact is uplifting or destructive, for frequently it is both. Cross-cultural contact often "cashes in" the potential creativity embedded in a culture. By accepting the eventual decline of that culture, we are also mobilizing its creative forces to unprecedented levels, at least for a while.

With these questions and frameworks in mind, let us turn to our story.





## **Chapter one: The Pueblo, Its Isolation and its Contacts**

Despite their cultural and geographic isolation from the remainder of Mexico, Oapan residents are remarkably mobile. They travel regularly to Iguala (pop. 60,000), four hours away, to go shopping, buy artisan materials, sell wares, or simply for something to do. Taxco (pop. 52,000), Cuernavaca (pop. 346,000), and Acapulco (pop. 640,000) are further away but receive regular visits as well, largely for economic reasons. It is common for villagers to get up at four o'clock in the morning to make one of these trips with a pick-up truck, bus, or "combi" leaving town. Many of the artisans strike out for longer trips to more distant locales, including Puerto Vallarta, Guadalajara, Oaxaca, Tijuana, and Cancún, among others.

A wide variety of customary and informal institutions enable local families to sell and lend each other land, animals, and labor. Not everyone wants to, or is able to, work the land every year, and these transactions allow community resources to be put to better use. Access to land, animals, and human labor is reshuffled on a regular basis, not just within Oapan but across villages as well. Individuals enter joint ventures to reap the benefits of cooperation and lower risk. The town government lends out animals to the very poorest families, as a kind of welfare system.

Cholera remains an occasional problem, but the town is relatively sanitary, given its low material standard of living and lack of modern garbage disposal technology.

### Neighbors

Oapan residents regard themselves as more important than their immediate neighbors. On the other side of the river lies Analco, the much smaller "twin city" to San Agustín. A

small boat waits on either side of the river, to take passengers from one pueblo to the other, usually for the charge of a penny. To the east lies the pueblo of San Miguel Tecuiciapan, Oapan's perennial enemy in the struggle for land (see chapter five for more on this conflict).

Higher in the mountains, and closer to the main road, lies Ameyaltepec, another artisan village. One (optimistic) villager once described Ameyaltepec to me as: "Forty minutes by foot, or an hour by car." The journey by foot, of course, would be straight up into the mountains.

Oapan has a different feel from Ameyaltepec, even though Ameyaltepec was settled by Oapan emigrants in pre-Hispanic times, and both villages specialize in amates and crafts. Ameyaltepec is much richer, cleaner, and more orderly. It does not allow its drunks to hang out in the town square or lie in the streets. Nor are pigs allowed to roam the streets, as they must be corralled and kept out of public view. The streets are swept every weekend. Ameyaltepec is almost medieval in setting, as it is built into a steep hillside. Of the two pueblos, Oapan is considered to be more political and more contentious. It has a richer history and offers more large fiestas. Oapan has stronger ties to traditional Catholic and Nahuatl religions, whereas Ameyaltepec residents prefer charismatic approaches with greater frequency. Oapan lies on the river, whereas Ameyaltepec does not. Oapan has about twice as many families.<sup>8</sup>

Ameyaltepec has higher levels of trust, or at least it suppresses conflict more successfully. Oapan residents envy the extensive social networks of Ameyaltepec. When an Ameyaltepec resident travels to Cancún, for instance, to sell wares, he or she can draw upon an entire support network for this purpose; the same is true in Monterrey and other distant locales. A Oapan resident will not have access to similar help. Lower levels of

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<sup>8</sup> The Nahuatl language of Oapan has tones in lieu of some syllables, whereas the Ameyaltepec dialect relies on adding an extra syllable. The two dialects diverged after Oapan residents settled Ameyaltepec in the eighteenth century. Oapan developed tones in its Nahuatl, though none of the surrounding pueblos did. I am indebted to Jonathan Amith for this information and explanation.

trust mean that Oapan residents are more likely to work with other family members and hold a more limited circle of contacts.

Residents of the two pueblos are generally fond of each other, but stereotypes remain. Ameyaltepec residents consider Oapan residents to be old-fashioned, quarrelsome and immature, almost like babies. The residents of Oapan note that the residents of Ameyaltepec are hardworking and save all their money. Ameyaltepec takes pride in being the richest of the villages and in being the first pueblo to paint amates. San Agustín takes pride in being the oldest pueblo, the most traditional, the historic center, the largest, and having the most elaborate Easter fiesta. A few Oapan residents remarked to me that under the surface, the Ameyaltepec residents are the weirder of the two groups, citing several leading Ameyaltepec amate painters who have gone insane (Alfonso Lorenzo, Urbano Símón, and Jesús Corpos Aliberto all fit this description).

Despite these differences across pueblos, individuals from the Alto Balsas area share broader cultural similarities. They are typically highly independent, individualistic, somewhat stubborn, and intensely loyal to their families and kinship networks. The work ethic is strong, alcoholism aside, and the Alto Balsas Nahuas consider most outside groups to be lazy and uncommitted. Anthropologist Peggy Golde, who lived in the area in 1959, remarked "They will always do fine, they are smart people"; most visitors share this impression.

Recent remarks of Felix Jimenez, a leading Oapan painter, summed up a common attitude towards religion. Felix noted that the villagers had different gods during the pre-conquest period, but that they now have a second set of gods [sic]. He says he likes the current gods, and thinks they have done the village well. He wonders, however, whether they might someday be replaced by a third set of gods.

Put into this chapter:

As recently as 1980, a journey to the village involved a ten-hour trek from Cuernavaca, the last six hours on a mule. Today the nearest full-size store remains four hours away.

Into ch. 2: He was born "Tomás," but adopted the name Juan, partly because he likes the associated saint, and partly as a conscious rebellion against his father's choice of name.