

Mujer zapoteca de las nubes

ZAPOTEC WOMAN OF THE CLOUDS

La Vida de la Partera-Curandera Enriqueta Contreras Contreras

The Life of the Midwife-Healer Enriqueta Contreras Contreras



María Margarita Návar



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by Mary Margaret Návar

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Zapotec Press
Austin, Texas



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Zapotec Press
5073 Fort Clark Dr.
Austin, Texas 78745

Diseñadora del libro/Book design by Cheryl Rae, Out There Books
Diseño gráfico de la portada/Cover design by Laura Baberena
Ilustraciones/Illustrations by Liliana Wilson

Fotografía propiedad de/All photography © Mary Margaret Návar
Fotografía de la portada de atrás/Back cover photograph © James Ross

Printed in the U.S.A.

ISBN:978-0-578-05747-7

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MAPA: Los pueblos mancomunados de la sierra Juárez

MAP: The United Communities of the Sierra Juárez



Todo tiene vida y merece un gran respeto.

Es imperativo que haya un cambio de conciencia mundial en el cual se dé énfasis al cuidado de los demás, de nuestro medio ambiente, de las plantas, del agua y de todo nuestro universo.

Nosotros somos los zapotecos de la sierra, nuestros abuelos decían que éramos “las gentes de las nubes”, porque detrás de las nubes, está la claridad de la vida. Y detrás de esa claridad, están los comportamientos de nuestras gentes mayores que lucharon por legarnos un valor tan importante que es el respeto.

Everything has life and deserves great respect.

It is imperative that there is a change of world consciousness in which we emphasize the care of others, our environment, the plants, the water and everything that is our universe.

We are the Zapotecs of the Sierra Juárez. Our grandparents used to say that we were the “people of the clouds,” because behind the clouds, there is clarity of life. Behind that clarity is the proper conduct of our elders who fought to bequeath to us an extremely important value called respect.

Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras

Partera y curandera zapoteca/Zapotec midwife-healer

AGRADECIMIENTOS

Con todo respeto, este trabajo está dedicado al linaje de 2,500 años de los curanderos zapotecos de Oaxaca, México, y, especialmente, a Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras, portadora de esta sabiduría y representante fiel de su linaje. En sesenta años de servicio a su comunidad, ella continúa compartiendo inagotablemente sus conocimientos de medicina tradicional, partería y curación. Estoy profundamente agradecida con ella, tanto como con los miembros de su familia, especialmente sus hijos Adelfo, Mari, Gaude, Sadot y Norma, y Celia, quienes generosamente me abrieron sus corazones oaxaqueños a través de los años.

De acuerdo con la costumbre zapoteca de la colaboración, esta obra es el resultado de los esfuerzos de muchas amistades entre dos naciones. Estoy agradecida con el Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres por su homenaje a Doña Enriqueta. La traducción al español fue enriquecida por Liliana Valenzuela, Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres, Laura Asberry, María Elena Martínez y, especialmente, Emelia Vargas de Terr, quien colaboró con la introducción. El comité de redacción en inglés incluyó a la Dr. Teresa Davidson, a Jenny Hill y a Joann Navar Atchley. Gracias a Laura Baberena por el diseño gráfico de la portada. También quiero agradecer a mi compañera, Liliana Wilson, por sus ilustraciones y por su apoyo incansable en la ejecución de este proyecto. Gracias a Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg, Director del Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca por sus finas atenciones. Desde luego, esta obra no hubiera sido posible sin la gentil dirección de mi maestro, el Dr. Américo Paredes, profesor emérito de la Universidad de Texas en Austin, quien hace años inspiró mi interés en el estudio del folclor como un sendero de vida.

No hubiera podido realizar este trabajo sin el amor y las oraciones de mi familia y de mis amistades. Muchas gracias por alentar mi sueño de presentar la vida de Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras.

María Margarita Nívar
Austin, Texas
14 de febrero de 2010

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work is respectfully dedicated to the 2,500-year history of Zapotec healers in Oaxaca, Mexico, and specifically to Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras, wisdom bearer and faithful representative of that lineage. In sixty years of service to her community, she continues without ceasing to share her knowledge of traditional medicine, midwifery, and healing. I am profoundly grateful to her and to her family, especially her children Adelfo, Mari, Gaude, Sadot and Norma, and to Celia, for generously opening their Oaxacan hearts to me throughout the years.

As is the custom of community collaboration among the Zapotecs, this work is a composite of the efforts of many friends across two nations. I am grateful to Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres, M.D. for his homage to Doña Enriqueta. The editing of the Spanish version was greatly assisted by Liliana Valenzuela, Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres, Laura Asberry, María Elena Martínez and especially Emelia Vargas de Terr, who collaborated with me on the Introduction. The English editorial committee included Dr. Teresa Davidson, Jenny Hill and Joann Navar Atchley. Thanks to Laura Baberena for her graphic design of the cover. I also want to thank my partner Liliana Wilson for her illustrations and for her encouragement in the execution of this project. Thanks to Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg, Director of the Ethnobotanical Gardens of Oaxaca, for his kind assistance. Without a doubt, this work would not have been possible without the gentle guidance of my mentor Dr. Américo Paredes, Professor Emeritus at the University of Texas at Austin, who long ago inspired my interest in the study of folklore as a way of life.

I would not have realized this work without the love and prayers of my family and friends. Thank you for encouraging my dream of presenting the life of Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras.

Mary Margaret Nívar
Austin, Texas
February 14, 2010



PROLOGUE



[Author's Note: For the benefit of a wider audience, this book is written in two languages: Spanish on the left, English on the right.]

When I first met Doña Enriqueta Contreras, a midwife, herbalist and healer from Oaxaca, Mexico, she was dressed majestically in traditional Zapotecan clothing. She sat on a couch across from seventeen enthusiastic women who were getting ready for the ride of their life. They just didn't know it.

The Indigenous Women's Network Center for Social Change at Alma de Mujer, in Austin, Texas, sponsored a weeklong intensive "Institute on Traditional Medicine and Healing," hosted by the incessantly tireless activist and artist Marsha Gómez. The goal of our retreat was to steep in five days of Doña Enriqueta's encyclopedic knowledge of plants and healing, based on her strong Zapotecan spiritual values and principles. Marsha preplanned our busy week, as we do in western culture, with a tightly woven hour-by-hour, task-by-task schedule.

On the first morning, Doña Enriqueta stood up from the breakfast table and politely greeted us, "Buenos días." She paused for a moment, allowing us to give her our undivided attention. "I understand that you've come here because you want to become healers." She scanned us with intense interest. "Then, before we get on with this agenda," she



"Las mujeres son como un jardín de hermosas flores."

Doña Enriqueta

"Women are like a garden of beautiful flowers."

Doña Enriqueta

the reasons why we are who we are so we can better help others
placed the paper to the side, "let us pause and take this opportunity to look deeply into our souls and find the reasons why we are who we are, so we can better help others."

That invitation began the spiritual adventure of our lives. We started our conversation by taking turns going around the table, telling our personal life stories --some of hardship, others of tragedy-- while sharing numerous boxes of Kleenex. As the day went on the emotional intensity increased. We witnessed ourselves opening up like buds of a flower, confirming one of Doña Enriqueta's core philosophies that "women are like a garden of beautiful flowers."

We sat around the table for fourteen hours straight, barely breaking for lunch and dinner. Each woman wove her story into a collective tapestry that seemed to collapse time and transcend other dimensions. At the end of each story, Doña Enriqueta leaned forward, sending waves of compassionate energy towards the now emotionally spent woman. The midwife-healer then shared an assessment of that woman in physical, emotional and spiritual terms, as only a traditional Zapotecan healer can. We ended at 11p.m. that night. When we finished the raw and revealing process, Doña Enriqueta looked at the lot of us. "Now, we are ready to resume our agenda." It was an unforgettable experience for each woman.

For the next four days, we were instructed in countless medicinal remedies. Doña Enriqueta shared with us her encyclopedic knowledge of herbs; she took us on daily plant walks where she pointed out the medicinal properties of trees, by leaf, root and bark. We made healing salves with plants from the garden, for example we made a calendula salve for cuts and insect bites. We learned to make soap from the root of the yucca plant. We made medicinal extracts, such as rosemary extract. To make an extract, herbs are steeped in alcohol for thirty days then strained. The strained liquid is diluted with water then transferred to dropper bottles for proper dosage.

More importantly, we learned the spiritual values of a traditional Zapotec healer. She emphasized the crucial importance of our relationship to Mother Nature. We learned about the value of respect, for

ourselves, for each other, for our ancestors and for all living things. By the end of the intensive, each one of us bonded deeply with our master teacher and with each other as sisters who shared in an extraordinary healing experience. To top it all off, Doña Enriqueta, in addition to being a midwife, healer and herbalist, turned out to be an excellent cook whose unforgettable tasty preparations were frequent delights.

One evening after dinner dishes were done, the lights were dimmed, and quiet returned to the main lodge. Out of the dark, I heard my name, "Margarita." I turned around to see Doña's silhouette sitting on the same couch where I met her. I asked her if she needed something. "No, come over here, I want to talk to you." I tiptoed to where she was and sat down next to her. In a low voice, Doña Enriqueta said to me, "You know, I'm not going to be here forever. We are like birds just passing through, and I don't want to take all this knowledge with me. I want to share it with as many people as possible, and I want to ask you--would you like to continue studying with me?"

I couldn't believe it--my dream had come true! She was extending an invitation to work closely with her, a master healer offering me a lifetime of experiences. I sat motionless for a moment. Then I nodded gratefully, "Of course, it would be a privilege to learn from you. Thank you, Grandmother." I respectfully kissed her hand, sealing our agreement.

As of that night, I began a twelve-year apprenticeship and friendship based on endless discussions about healing, spirituality, and Zapotecan history and medicine. Serving as Doña's translator and personal assistant, I have traveled the world with my great mentor and friend, bound to her by endless hours of light-hearted laughter and storytelling.

On the sunny morning before our departure, Doña Enriqueta called us for a closing meditation circle in the beautiful field in front of the main lodge. Every woman was dressed in her finest outfit with no idea of what was to come. She asked us to join hands and close our eyes. Then, guiding us in a profound meditation, she took us far away, deep into our bodies, hearts and souls, while she rocked us in

the arms of Mother Nature with her calming voice. We felt the tranquil presence of the exquisite natural surroundings. Doña Enriqueta softly began singing one of her favorite hymns, Perdón, [Forgive Me], which she traditionally uses in her powerful healing sessions.

The intensity of her voice was resounding across the field when we started to feel drops of rain tapping on our faces. Doña Enriqueta continued on with her song. The rain fell harder and harder. Before we knew it, we were completely soaked in a torrential rain. We stood motionless in the middle of the field.

As Doña Enriqueta concluded the meditation, a bolt of lightning crashed from the clouds. It jolted our eyes open, and we looked in amazement at each other, acknowledging the extraordinary orchestra of natural forces conducted by the master healer Doña Enriqueta. We were grateful for her presence and to our host Marsha for her dream of bringing us together to share one of the most extraordinary weeks of our lives. Doña Enriqueta's beaming



Las flores de la buganvilla morada (Bougainvillea glabra choisy) sirven para tratar las condiciones respiratorias.

The blossoms from the purple bougainvillea (Bougainvillea glabra choisy) are for treating respiratory conditions.

smile announced the end of the rain. The clouds gently drifted away, leaving a clear blue sky in their place. Lifting her arms in gratitude she said, "Thank you God," acknowledging the miracles of Mother Nature. The sun agreed with its own Texas smile.

We hugged each other as we said our tearful goodbyes. Every woman headed her separate way. Doña Enriqueta flew back to Oaxaca, the rest of us spread throughout North America. The tastes, the recipes and the healing remedies of those five days were embedded in our bodies and minds forever. Like a healing herb, Doña Enriqueta rooted herself in each one of our hearts as a powerful medicine.

Years later, we are still talking about the experiences of that extraordinary intensive on traditional medicine guided by the Zapotecan master. Marsha warned me when she told me about the invitation to Doña Enriqueta to come to Austin, "This woman will change your life."

And she did.



Lupino (Lupinus sp.) sirve para tratar los quistes de mama.

Bluebonnet (Lupinus sp.) is used for treating cysts in the breasts.





Introduction

HERITAGE OF A HEALER

Herbalism and indigenous medicine in Mexico are the ancient legacy of the different pre-Hispanic cultures. In 1572, the King of Spain, Phillip II, expressed great interest in the knowledge of indigenous doctors. This prompted him to commission the court's head physician Francisco Hernández to investigate this subject and describe in detail new world medicinal plants and their applications.¹ Francisco Hernández traveled for six years in the different regions of New Spain investigating and identifying more than 3000 plants. His persistent interviewing of the indigenous doctors increased his knowledge and understanding of traditional indigenous medicine and herbalism and the importance of its economic impact in the West.² Testimonies from Spanish chroniclers indicate that the condition of the health of the indigenous people was generally magnificent.³

Among the different regions where traditional medicine stood out in New Spain, which later became Mexico, the southern state of Oaxaca excelled with its Zapotec culture established more than 2,500 years ago. This culture has so succeeded in preserving the uses and traditions of indigenous medicine, that despite the constant and devastating impact of European invaders, it has survived since

the 16th century.⁴

From a geographical standpoint, the Zapotecs have inhabited four regions of the state of Oaxaca: the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (the most narrow area between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans); the Central Valleys (the area between the Southern Sierra Madre and the Sierra Juárez mountain ranges); the South (the Pacific coastal area) and the Sierra Juárez (a high altitude area of pine forests).⁵ The midwife-healer Doña Enriqueta Contreras comes from this last region, where the people refer to themselves as "the people of the clouds."⁶

Within the Sierra Juárez, there exists a grouping of villages that consider themselves an independent confederation. Their government is an autonomous democracy, self-named *Pueblos Mancomunados* or "United Communities." They have three municipal towns: Santa Catarina Lachatao, San Juan Amatlán, y Santa María Yavesía. These towns serve as judicial and administrative centers. Under the authority of the three larger towns are five smaller villages: Benito Juárez, Cuajimoloyas, La Nevería, Llano Grande and Latuvi. Each one of the villages works collectively with a municipal town to which they are responsible and must submit reports. These "United Communities" administrate their settlements with minimum federal interference.

1 See Francisco Hernández Natural History of New Spain, (UNAM: Mexico), 1959

2 It is lamentable that his work does not mention nor give names of the indigenous physicians that he interviewed.

3 See Cristina Barros and Marco Buenrostro Nutrition Among the Ancient Mexicans (UNAM:Mexico, D.F.), 2007

4 In addition to the cultural and ecclesiastical impacts, we cannot lose sight of the impact of western medicine that was brought by the Spanish to the indigenous populations of Mesoamerica.

5 See Miguel E. Berumen Barbosa Geografía Económica de Oaxaca (Eumed.net: June 2003)

6 Personal conversation with Doña Enriqueta regarding Zapotec customs

Doña Enriqueta con una brazada de albahaca (Ocimum basilicum) para sus sesiones curativas. ▷

Doña Enriqueta with an armful of basil (Ocimum basilicum) for her healing sessions.



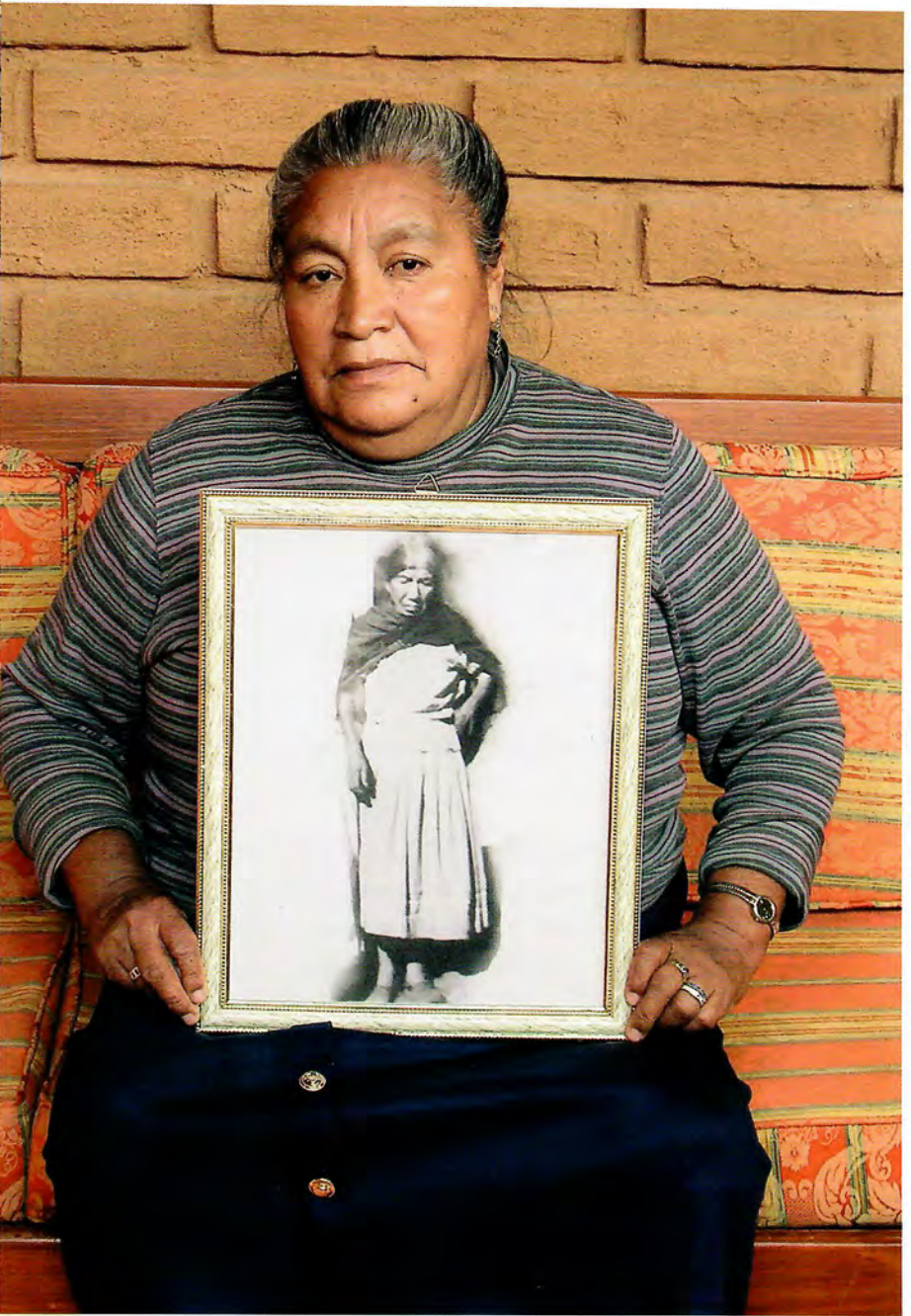
Doña Enriqueta muestra una planta medicinal durante una caminata.

Doña Enriqueta demonstrates a medicinal herb on her plantwalk.



Doña Enriqueta con su abuela paterna, la partera y curandera Marcelina Hernández de Contreras.

Doña Enriqueta with her paternal grandmother, the midwife-healer Marcelina Hernández de Contreras. ▽



Doña Enriqueta señala las características y propiedades curativas de las plantas



Doña Enriqueta points out the characteristics and healing properties of the plants.

Throughout the centuries, the Zapotecs have been unique in their diligent and remarkable preservation of their culture. In the capital city of Oaxaca, they have their traditional festivities, like the Festival of *La Guelaguetza*, that is the most well known, not only in Oaxaca, but also throughout the world. This event takes place every July. It celebrates the pre-Columbian tradition of *el trueque* [ehl-tru-EH-keh], an exchange of dance, food, and folk regional customs from among the villages. This exchange has been used within the Zapotec culture for hundreds of years, as an interchange of resources before money existed.⁷ Today, it is still frequently used among the Zapotec communities.

Traditional medicine, with its great knowledge of herbalism, has been supported by the exuberant variety of flora and fauna that stands out in this Mesoamerican region, and in the world. This has assured that indigenous medicine has survived even in modern times, and for centuries it has been the basis of the health care of these populations.

The different pre-Hispanic groups have their own traditional doctors or healers.⁸ As regards their education and training, the knowledge is generally transmitted by an elder woman or man, typically a grandmother or grandfather. This person is widely recognized and respected for their experience.

Healers, or traditional doctors, have great knowledge, and they respect each other's experience in their specialties. Payment is not profit-based, if it is, it is considered disreputable in the community.

The following paragraphs describe a brief biographical panorama of the origins and heritage of the Zapotec midwife-healer, Doña Enriqueta Contreras Contreras, who shared with us her interesting and enriching life.

Doña Enriqueta tells us that her paternal grandmother was a midwife in her native village of Benito Juárez, Oaxaca. Ever since Enriqueta was a little girl, she felt very attracted to, and interested in, what her grandmother did. She remembers

that when there was a birth in progress she would spy inconspicuously on the process through the knotholes in the side of the cabin. She says that her mind recorded every detail of her grandmother's work, including the herbs that she used for the childbirth. Little by little, those experiences enriched her interest in becoming a practical midwife and traditional healer. Doña Enriqueta points out that access to a midwife in the ranches and villages of the forgotten region has never been easy. On many occasions it required, and it still requires, walking on foot or riding on horseback to get to a mother that is in labor.

Doña Enriqueta tells us that when she was sixteen years old, her younger sister, Modesta, was going to give birth. She lived on a ranch outside of Benito Juárez, a remote area where there was no midwife. Her sister was alone and defenseless. This emergency situation forced the young Enriqueta to assume the responsibility of helping her sister. Thanks to the knowledge obtained from observing her grandmother, and her own infallible sense of self-confidence, she helped deliver her first child, who was her nephew. This experience was the beginning of her career as a practical midwife in her community.

This healer of Zapotec origin has performed as a midwife for more than 60 years. She has facilitated more than 2000 childbirths in her career. She points out that she has never lost a mother or a child in childbirth, an extraordinary feat even by Western standards. Furthermore, her broad and profound knowledge of herbalism and traditional healing accord her great respect.

Participation in one of her open-air master classes on mountain footpaths, observing and identifying plants, is an exceptional and unforgettable experience. In these classes, Doña Enriqueta points out the distinct characteristics and curative properties of, as well as the applications and contraindications of, the innumerable herbs and trees of the Sierra Juárez.

It would be an oversight not to mention Doña Enriqueta's intense daily routine. She begins her activities early in the morning. She goes to the local farmers markets three times a week. She carefully selects fresh vegetables and fruits, and armfuls of flowers for her healing sessions. She picks up her

7 Personal conversation with Doña Enriqueta on the tradition of community exchange

8 Midwives, snake diviners, corn diviners, folk masseurs and masseuses, bone setters and fortune tellers



En sus conferencias y talleres, Doña Enriqueta enfatiza la urgente necesidad de rescatar los valores comunitarios.

At her workshops and conferences, Doña Enriqueta emphasizes the urgent need to recover community values.

orders of fresh herbs from the market herb vendors for preparing tinctures, salves, cough syrups, and other remedies. The rest of the day, she dedicates to treating her patients or “*mis pacientitas*”⁹ with remedies from a vast herbal pharmacy that she personally prepares.

Doña Enriqueta also prepares the *temascal*.¹⁰ The preparations for this ritual start at six in the morning with stoking the wood for the fire and lighting it. Then, she boils water on her stove for tea for drinking and for pouring over the body of the person sweating in the *temascal*. Then, she assembles the bouquets of flowers used for lightly tapping the body to stimulate circulation while in the sweat bath. The final chore is to prepare a separate space with sheets and blankets in which to wrap the participants at the conclusion of the ritual.

In the course of her life, Doña Enriqueta’s interest in the health of her family, her patients and her community has led to her taking advantage of opportunities to learn and to continue to improve herself. For example, she successfully trained as a first aid emergency worker for the Mexican Red Cross in 1974. In 1990, on behalf of the National Indigenous Institute (NII), she was trained as a rural community health worker. There, she took the

opportunity to continue exercising her knowledge of traditional medicine and herbalism and she learned how to vaccinate people, as well. The Institute gave her the responsibility to carry out campaigns to distribute medicine. She often did so while traveling on foot, or on horseback, throughout the Zapotec regions. She taught the importance of personal and family hygiene in the lives of the rural inhabitants.

She also learned to certify health workers for the rural areas. This allowed her to identify traditional healers and incorporate them into the NII staff teams. All this work in the rural areas of her people posed serious dangers for Doña Enriqueta. She had to trek on foot, or on horseback, day and night, to get to remote settlements in the mountains to carry out vaccination campaigns. She had to cross over raging rivers on bridges made of reed that see-sawed back and forth, or travel to far-off villages by boat or canoe. There are too many stories to recount of the hair-raising adventures in Doña Enriqueta’s life as a healer.

At her profound conferences and workshops, she emphasizes the urgent need to rescue our community values, particularly the need to treat each other with respect, and to collaborate together for the mutual well being, survival, and continued existence of all of us and our world. Doña Enriqueta says, “A simple greeting like ‘Good Morning’ or ‘Good Afternoon’ is a good place to begin our mutual existence with each other.” She laments the fact that “people don’t even know who their neighbors are.” She says that, in actuality, people live isolated lives without concern for others. Her words exhort us to consider the imperative need for a change in world consciousness in which we know and care for each other, the environment, the plants, the water and our entire universe. The regrettable fact is that time is running out and we are facing potentially irreparable destruction.

Upon reflection, it is clear that Doña Enriqueta, with her broad and profound knowledge of traditional medicine, represents the legendary Zapotec wisdom that runs through her body, heart, and soul. Her persona inspires great admiration and respect for her life skills, dedication and accomplishments. Undoubtedly, this knowledge inherited from her Zapotec ancestors is an invaluable gift to us all. This is her story.

9 Affectionate term that Doña Enriqueta uses to refer to her patients, *pacientitas* [pah-see-ehn-TEE-tas]

10 *Temascal* [teh-mas-CAHL] is a traditional wet steam bath used by indigenous people since pre-Columbian times.



Doña Enriqueta en el Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca.

Doña Enriqueta at the Ethnobotanical Gardens of Oaxaca.



ZAPOTEC WOMAN OF THE CLOUDS¹

My name is Enriqueta Contreras Contreras. I am a Zapotec woman and I speak my own language, Zapotec. I was born in a community that was formerly known as *Rancho Tabla* [Pine Slat Ranch]², known today as [the village of] Benito Juárez, Oaxaca.

When I was born, my parents lived in a rural community. My mother had seven children, and I was among the youngest. At the age of three, my father died and we were left fatherless. I lived with my mother, but as things go in life, after my father's death, my mother moved in with another man. This man, Pablo Hernández, always told me that he was my father, but I never accepted him as a father, because I had known my father. My older sister Cordelia, who was six years old, and I, who was three, were alone with my father when he died. My mother had gone to work. We had another sister, Modesta, who had barely been born twenty days before.

My father had been ill for nine years and nine months. Our older sister, Cordelia, had been born with deformities. She was born a dwarf because our father was an alcoholic at a very young age. Since we were children, we didn't know the real cause of his death.

After my father's death, I lived with my mother for a while. At the age of six, my mother moved in with Mr. Pablo. That man always used to tell me to respect him as a father, but I could never love him that way because I fondly remembered my own father.

There was a couple that never had children. They were elderly and lived on another ranch. It is not clear what arrangements my mother made with that couple, but at the age of seven, I was given away to them. The same fate repeated itself because those people were alcoholics as well. When they were sober, they would feed me. When they weren't sober, they didn't even remember if I had eaten.

I was very young, and they sent me to care for a herd of goats. That became my daily chore. I had no clothing; I had no food. They treated me like the fringes of a shawl [to and fro.] They barely covered my back; they made a skirt from a tattered cloth and a little hat. That's how I had to tend to those animals. And because of the situation that I was in, I had to live with that family. I was with that couple until I was nine years old.

I could hardly bear my hunger pangs while up in the mountains. So I began to eat tender plants: little fruits, leaves and herbs that grew in the countryside. And so, whenever I was hungry, I would draw close to the plants. This is how I began to learn about medicinal and edible plants. I also belonged to a lineage of traditional healers, because my paternal grandmother was a midwife-healer. I was born with the gift of healing.

One day on the path where I used to go pasture the animals, I came across a schoolteacher, Vidal García, who taught in the rural villages. In those days, there were no automobiles. Nothing. Everything was on foot. Everything was on foot to reach the outlying ranches around the villages where the teachers taught rural children. He always asked me, "Little girl, why are you alone up here? Don't you have a mother?" I replied that I had no mother, because when my mother got together with that man, she gave me away. She never worried about me again. I no longer had a father. Neither my mother's, nor my father's families could support us

1 The following narrative is the result of an interview with Doña Enriqueta where I asked her one question: "Tell us the story of your life."

2 Phrases or words in brackets serve to clarify a sentence, a relationship or a Spanish word.

at that time. The majority of people were poor and they had no resources. The schoolteacher told me, "Someday, I am going to take you to Oaxaca City so that you won't suffer anymore."

One morning, as I pastured my herd in the countryside, suddenly a mother goat began screaming in pain. She couldn't have her baby. With each contraction, she drew closer to me. She licked me and cried louder. I told her, "What is the matter with you?" I saw how blood ran out of her vagina. I told her, "Maybe you are trying to have your baby," seeing that she couldn't deliver her baby. I told her, "If I can help you, then I am going to help you."

Guided by my destiny, it occurred to me to scurry down to the river's edge. The mother goat followed me. There was a type of leaf that has the form of a scoop. With that leaf, I went to bring water from the river. I poured it on her belly. By the fifth trip of bringing water, suddenly the baby goat popped out. Her offspring had finally been born. The mother goat, instead of licking the baby clean, turned and licked me instead and she got closer to me. At that moment I realized how a baby is born. I made the decision right then. "When I grow-up, I am going to be a midwife," I thought to myself. Many years went by that I lived up there.

When I turned nine years old, the schoolteacher brought me to the city of Oaxaca. **By that time, I was well acquainted with many plants.** Sometimes when people complained of a pain or diarrhea, I would tell them to eat this herb and they would feel better. Or, I told them, "Give this to your child..." And it would have a beneficial effect.

That period of my life was very difficult for me after I went to Oaxaca City. In Oaxaca, I worked as a nanny for Vidal Garcia's mother. When the teacher was at home, his mother treated me well. But when the teacher left to go to work in the rural areas, his mother treated me abusively. The mother was responsible for her grandchildren, and I cared for them. Early in the mornings, I had to get up to dress the grandchildren to get them ready for breakfast. Once they finished breakfast, I took them to school. When I returned, the grandmother had already gathered the leftovers from their plates on the table. She ordered, "Sit over there and eat that.

That's what you are going to eat." I sat in a corner of the floor and ate what was given to me. I was so hungry I ate the grandchildren's table scraps. Time went by like this.

Suddenly one day, the schoolteacher's brother, who was an engineer, asked me if I wanted to go live with his family in Mexico City. I left with them. My mother no longer had knowledge of me. Once I settled in Mexico City, this family was different. They treated me much kinder. They had school age children and they hired a tutor to come over to their home to teach them in the afternoons. The wife of the engineer told me, "If you hurry and finish all your chores, when the tutor comes, I am going to tell him to start teaching you the vowels." And that's how I learned my first letters.

As a young woman, I worked in a new subdivision of Mexico City, *Colonia Industrial*. There were many working class poor people living there. When I was done caring for the children, I would go out and play with them. Suddenly, women would approach me and say, "My child is very sick, he is afflicted by this." I would tell them, "Give him these herbs, it will help him." And that is how I started to heal many children whose parents would ask me advice about a pain. I always helped them. I thought I was doing well in my job as a nanny.

One day out of nowhere, I received a letter sent by my older brother. My mother had written it. She wanted me to return to Oaxaca at the age of seventeen. They wanted me to return because they found out, through a cousin that worked with me, that I had a boyfriend. Since I did not know how to read, I asked the lady of the house to read the letter for me. The lady told me, "You must go because your mother wants you to go. She says she is very sick and she wants to see you for the last time." "Don't do what you want," the lady said, "but do it for your mother because she is your mother. You have to go."

It was the season of the Day of the Dead festivities. I returned to Oaxaca with some other companions from the same village that worked close to me [in Mexico City]. I returned [to Oaxaca City]. When the train pulled into the station, my mother and my older brother were there with another woman who went to pick me up. When my mother



The village of Benito Juárez nestled by the Sierra.

saw me, she burst into tears, and said, “How good that you have arrived, let’s go home.” And I left with them.

I remember to get home, we crossed through the city of Oaxaca, and from there we went [eastward] to Teotitlán del Valle. The next day, we started our ascent on foot to Benito Juárez. When we arrived, my sisters, the older Cordelia and Modesta, barely born when our father died, were at the house. They

were grown now. We got together and went to play.

On the fourth day after I had come home, a man, who was to be my children’s father, arrived to speak to my mother. He wanted to marry me. I didn’t know who he was. It was indecipherable what my mother was saying to the man while we played. We saw the man enter the house to speak to my mother and my older brother. Later, they went to fetch our paternal grandmother, and they spoke with

her as well. Then, they told me, “This young man had come because he wants to marry you. We’ve already settled with this young man. We’ve already come to an agreement.” My mother ordered me to go speak to the young man, whose name was Benjamin.

Early next morning, my grandmother arrived and said my mother had informed her about what had happened. She explained how it was our people’s tradition that when a man entered the house seeking the hand of an unmarried woman, she was obligated to marry him. The elders made the agreement for me to marry Benjamin, and the marriage contract was carried out.

We went to live in La Nevería, a small village fourteen miles from Benito Juárez. My younger sister Modesta was pregnant and she lived on her ranch. Modesta’s life was very difficult because she ended up with an alcoholic husband. Modesta was pregnant; the husband was drunk, and no one to help her out.

One day, I wanted to go visit her at her ranch. When I arrived, she was complaining about labor pains because her child was going to be born and no one was with her. When I arrived, my sister told me, “I am so glad you have come because I am in a lot of pain. Who knows what’s the matter with me?” I answered her, “Maybe your baby’s going to be born.” I remembered how my grandmother, the midwife, did things, how she would give the mother an herb tea to drink. “I’m going to give you Feverfew (*Chrysanthemum parthenium*).” So I went to harvest the fresh herbs. I prepared them in a clay pot and gave it to her to drink. A little while later, the contractions came on stronger. In less than two hours, the baby was born. According to me, I knew what I was doing and I did it well. The baby was born, and the placenta followed. I didn’t know how very well, but I attended my first delivery, that of my sister.

I stayed with her because she was alone and it was already late. At dusk, my mother arrived and said, “What are you doing?” “I came to see my sister,” I replied. “That’s good,” answered my mother. “Yes,” I responded, “everything is good. That is why I came so that nothing would happen. Her husband is drunk and he is there with her.”

“Yes,” my mother said, “that’s fine but has she already had the baby?” “No,” I told her. I didn’t tell her the baby had already been born. Instead I said “It hasn’t been born.”

At that moment, my mother entered the house, and the baby started to cry. “How can it be that you said this child is not born, and how did you do it?” Then, I confessed, “Well, it just happened, I gave her the tea, I wrapped her, I cleaned the baby and that was it.” I didn’t even know where to cut off the umbilical cord when a child is born. I left it too long, rolled it up, and fastened it. When my mother arrived, she checked over the baby and explained, “No my dear, when a baby is born, you measure from its bellybutton upward four fingers, cut it and with a [heated] corn cob you cauterize it so it won’t get infected, and then the [remaining] cord will soon fall off.” And that was how I attended my first delivery. Today, my nephew is a grown man.

Once word traveled that I had delivered my sister’s baby, people started to seek me out. I was already versed in healing children. That is how people got to know about my work. Many people gave more priority to what I did than to what a doctor did.

Time went by in my marriage. We lived in



La Santa María (Chrysanthemum parthenium) sirve para el trabajo de parto para estimular las contracciones.

Feverfew (Chrysanthemum parthenium) is used in traditional birthing to stimulate contractions.



Doña Enriqueta trabajó en El Punto durante dieciocho años.

Doña Enriqueta worked at El Punto for eighteen years.

La Nevería and I started to have my children. I delivered three of my children by myself. Mari [the eldest daughter] was born on the ranch. I was alone. Gaude [the middle son] had been born by the time the midwife got there. When Sadot [the youngest son] was born, I assisted myself in giving birth to a large baby. He weighed more than eight pounds. I was there by myself. That is how I formed my family, while people continued to seek me out.

We lived in La Nevería in an [economically] difficult situation. The National Red Cross started promoting public health awareness. They invited people to take an emergency first aid course at the Red Cross headquarters in Mexico City with the intention of returning to work in our community.

No one wanted to go to Mexico City; no one was acquainted with Mexico City then. And in order to go, you had to have money. But they offered scholarships and transportation. I told my husband

Benjamin, "I'm going to take that course because I want to learn." And he said, "But how are we going to do it?" I then spoke to my mother to see if she would babysit the children. So I left for Mexico City to take the course in emergency first aid.

They taught me how to determine when it was a high-risk pregnancy and a normal pregnancy. By then, of course, I had already attended many deliveries. I would tell people, "Yes, I will help you," but I never thought of the possible risks and problems it could have brought on. But I gave thanks to God because I had never been faced with complications. A few light ones, but I could always remedy them with herbs, a massage or a *cerrada*.³

When I returned to La Nevería, I presented my credentials to the town authority. I let him know I had gone to take the first aid course. The Red Cross intended for me to return to work in my own community.

The village administrator's wife performed the role of midwife. He said to me, "Why do you think you are going to stay here and work? My wife handles the deliveries, so what are you going to do? I don't think that in one month you learned about the risks and problems that one has to resolve. We're not going to allow this." I answered him, "That's fine, just sign this document that the office of the Department of Health gave me, because if you say I am not staying, I need to get your signature so that they are aware of your refusal." The man signed the paper and the next day, I left for Oaxaca City.

I presented myself at the offices of the Department of Health. I explained to the man in charge of my jurisdiction, "Well, I went to my village and they did not accept me for a position." I was angry because I already had so many problems, especially since I was not [originally] from that village. So when I went to the Department, the man in charge took out a file of papers and said to me, "Don't worry dear, there are many communities that need health workers, so you choose!" I looked over the list and saw the community of El Punto. I told the man, "I'll go to El Punto," without knowing

3 A *cerrada* [seh-RAH-dah] is a traditional technique used to close the mother's energetic body after the birthing.

with whom I would be getting involved. The man in charge said, "I'm going to prepare your orders right now so that you can present yourself today, and see what they say." From Oaxaca City, I took my orders and left for El Punto.

Since we were poor, I only owned two bundles of clothing and my sandals. I did not have a professional uniform to wear in the community. When I arrived to see the town authorities, I told them, "I am responding to a request for solicitation that you are looking for community health workers. They sent me to work in your village." The town authority answered, "Si, señora, don't you worry, come on Sunday, we have a general community assembly and we want you to present yourself, because as to our need, we need you. Hopefully, the people will accept your proposal and you will stay with us." And they signed the orders for me to present myself that Sunday.

From El Punto, I walked [downhill] to La Cumbre and [east] to La Nevería. I got home and told Benjamin everything. And that's what happened. Sunday I was to present myself at El Punto.

Sunday morning at dawn, I walked from La Nevería to La Cumbre to catch the bus at eight in the morning. It passed through La Cumbre on its way up to El Punto.

The general assembly started off with my petition first on the agenda. I presented myself and they asked me where I was from. I handed over the orders, and they read them out loud and everybody approved. They said, "Let's do this now, if you wish." I answered, "I didn't come prepared, I just came to see if you would accept, and see what was next. I have a family, I have my children." They said, "Well then, right away." That very Sunday, they assembled some buildings, they called for community service [*tequio*]⁴, and they built two bungalows, one where I would work, and the other one where I lived. "Ready." they said, "Tomorrow you start to work." So, I returned to La Nevería that

Sunday afternoon.

At that time, I took with me both Norma [the youngest daughter] and Sadot [the youngest son] who were little. The others were in school. Gaude [the middle son] and Mari [the oldest daughter] were in boarding school. Adelfo [the oldest son] studied in Oaxaca City finishing high school.

I packed up and left for El Punto. I started my new job and the people stared at me like some weird insect because I didn't have a uniform, nothing that presented me as a professional person from an institution.

When I arrived, they hadn't yet finished the bungalows. My family went to live at my friend Mrs. Sara's father's house. From there, Mrs. Cuca gave us another week of lodging while they finished the bungalows where they accommodated me.

Starting to work from there, I attended people from all around, as well as, passers by. I delivered many babies. I gave thanks to God for that opportunity, even though I had many misfortunes. There were many divisions, problems mostly with my family, with my mother and my brother. They didn't even want to see me because a woman from our community does not do that. I never had the support of anyone, other than my own initiative. But that village gave me a lot and I worked eighteen years for the Department of Health.

Once established with the Department of Health, I took a course designed for the rural areas of Social Services. I passed the course and they asked me to be a health assistant at Benito Juárez. I worked Saturdays and Sundays in Benito Juárez and from Monday to Friday at El Punto. Sometimes I was in Benito Juárez when a lady was about to give birth. They located a car and they would go bring me from Benito Juárez to El Punto to deliver the baby. I worked five years for Social Services in Benito Juárez.

The majority of people knew me and they had faith in me. They came from Cuajimoloyas, Latuvi, El Carrizal and La Nevería. They came to seek my help. On Saturdays and Sundays, there was such a crowd! They said that on the days the doctors were in, hardly anyone went. But when I was there, many people would gather.

4 *Tequio* [TEK-key-oh] is traditional social service for the benefit of the community and is obligatory among the Zapotecs and other indigenous populations in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Unluckily, there was jealousy with a colleague who was the supervising nurse in Benito Juárez, who unfortunately was my cousin. She reported that I helped a lot of people, that I was dispensing medicine to the patients and that I was not documenting the proper information.

One Monday, on the tenth of May, Mother's Day, good mood or bad mood, I had to report to work. I worked on holidays, Saturdays and Sundays. So, the preceding Sunday night, I was resting at another cousin's house, when the local villagers came to see me because an expectant mother from Cuajimoloyas had arrived [at the clinic]. She was gravely ill and about to have her baby that very dawn. I delivered the baby and then another lady from the ranch had her baby that same morning. Then, they called me about a man who was in third degree dehydration. I gave him intravenous fluids and then a young boy followed who was badly burned.

The clinic was full and the people there began to probe. So, they called the supervising nurse on the short wave radio. Since there wasn't any telephone, they called on the radio for her to come and see what I was doing because I was exceeding medical regulations, according to them. Since I was only an assistant, I could not officially prescribe medications nor attend births. But since I knew how to do it, I did it.

When this happened, the nurse arrived around five o'clock in the afternoon. She said to me, "Well, who do you think you are? Why are there so many people here in the clinic?" I answered, "Look, don't ask me. Ask the patients why they are here! I didn't go get them from their houses. I am doing my work; I did not go bring them from their houses. Furthermore, these women come from far away, and since I've given birth, I could not let these women die simply because I would be breaking the rules of an institution, because the mother and child's lives are in the balance. The other woman came early because she was already bleeding and her baby was about to be born. And I, since I am a mother, I know what giving birth is like, so I had to lend her a hand, otherwise where are we headed? They are from our community; they're not from another state. They're from this very community, and supposedly, that's what this service is for!"

The nurse continued interrogating me, "And that man, what's he doing there?" I reiterated, "Well ask him! You're asking me, ask them!" I added, "I am not going to let myself be treated like this because I wasn't doing anything wrong."

Later, officials from the health committee arrived and they explained to them. "See, when the doctor comes, there's not a lot of people and when Doña Queta⁵ comes, she has many patients." And the story went on.

They looked at the young boy who was burned. I had already attended to him. The officials asked me, "Why are you using herbs?" I answered, "Because that's part of my work. I do not only use medicine. I treat the majority of my patients with medicinal plants. And if that is strange to you, well, that's what my patients heal with."

Then the head supervisor told me, "Well, we are going to file charges against you for exceeding the medical limits!" "Well, you can file charges now or whenever you want," I replied, "with Social Services or without Social Services, I am going to keep doing

5 "Queta" is a nickname for Enriqueta.



Doña Enriqueta recibe un manojo de pericón (Tagetes lucida) de su amiga Tía Juanita de Las Ánimas.

Doña Enriqueta receives a handful of Mexican marigold (Tagetes lucida) from her friend Aunt Juanita from the village of Las Ánimas.

what I do. This is not going to keep me from doing my work, because I live from this. I know that people who seek me know my work.”

They made me sign a document that the authorities insisted I sign. I said I would sign it because I was conscious that I was not doing anything wrong. They gave me an appointment at the offices of Social Services. They told me, “Tomorrow, you are to be at the offices so that you can sign your resignation papers because we are going to fire you.” “Fine,” I said, “no problem.” The people around me were crying because I was leaving. I said to them, “Don’t worry because no matter where I am, you must find me. It’s not a problem that I’m leaving this position.” The people responded, “But you survive from this work!” “Yes,” I replied, “I survive from this, but I can survive in other ways.”

The supervision was finished and I notified the village authorities. I gathered what little possessions I kept there and never returned to Social Services. The next day at the main office, I signed my resignation papers and they told me that I could not continue working for Social Services. “That’s fine,” I told them, and I went back to the village of El Punto and said nothing to any one.



El camino hacia Benito Juárez.

The road to Benito Juárez.

That was on a Monday. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday went by. On Friday, the [National Indigenous Institute’s] Director for the Coordinating Center at San Pablo Guelatao, Fernando Guadarrama, stopped by to see me in El Punto. “See here, Señora,” he said, “we are aware that you are working in traditional medicine. So, I want you to go work for us. We have a position for a Community Social Worker so you can come work with us.” I answered, “Look, to begin with, I do not have a document that will attest to what kind of training I have because institutions ask us for requirements, and I, frankly, don’t have those documents.” Guadarrama answered me, “No, you just show up next Monday. I don’t have to ask you for documents because your work is well known by many people and we want you to come to Guelatao.” Not even a week had gone by that I withdrew from Social Services in Benito Juárez, and now I was leaving for the National Indigenous Institute in Guelatao.

From then on, I lived in El Punto working at the Department of Health’s [village] clinic and I [also] started to work in Guelatao. I treated patients in El Punto on Saturdays and Sundays, and from Monday to Friday, I worked in Guelatao. And that’s how I came to be known.

I came to know all of the Sierra Juárez region as well as many Mexican states by working for the National Indigenous Institute [NII]. I started to do a lot of community health work with children in the indigenous boarding schools, certifying health workers and volunteers, as well as identifying traditional doctors from the different regions to invite them to organize themselves and exchange experiences and knowledge.

There was a lot of work going from community to community translating for the director of the Indigenous Coordinating Center in Guelatao, Mr. Fernando Guadarrama. They would go to the corner regions, highlands and lowlands of the Sierra Juárez where people spoke their native dialects. Many people did not speak Spanish. I served as his translator. I was always the lady they took everywhere. Many of my office colleagues would say that they did not have the privilege of going with the director, because no matter where he went, he had to take me since he did not speak Zapotec.

And I, who spoke Zapotec, could explain to him the agreements that were reached at community assemblies, because Mr. Fernando Guadarrama coordinated much of the fieldwork for the entire area of the Ixtlán district that encompassed several municipalities and many indigenous communities.

Working there [at the NII], they sent me as a representative to the Zapotec Indigenous Women's Forum in the [Mexican] state of Guerrero. And there, they gave me a lot of recognition, acknowledging my work at that reunion. Afterwards, they sent me to Veracruz and to Tuxtepec. More people got to know me outside of the Zapotec region and the state of Oaxaca.

While working at El Punto all those years, the best health services were offered by the clinic of the Department of Health. Then, Social Services opened a clinic at El Punto. That is when the people took sides.

It was a clinic offered by Social Services that gave free medical services, consultations and all that. Many people supported and accepted it. They told me, "They're going to shut down the Department of Health's clinic because Social Services is coming in and there can't be two clinics."

The divisions worsened. Many wanted me to continue there, and others did not. When the Social Services' clinic came in, it divided the people.

A short time elapsed, perhaps only two months, that Social Services was tops among the villagers, until they became aware that their services were not meeting the needs of the community. They were greatly surprised.

In the meantime, the people that supported me, like Señora Sara, and her husband, Señor Herminio, all the people from Las Ánimas, Tía Juanita, were the ones who were in agreement that I should stay in the community. They found me a house where I could stay even though I no longer worked at the clinic [in El Punto.] There I could offer personal consultations, in a private home that had nothing to do with either Social Services or the Department of Health. It would be my own private practice.

Some of my supporters, Señora Josefa and Señor Lidiondo said, "Well, we have a small room, and



Dos de las cosas que más han llegado a simbolizar la sierra Juárez: los pinos y las nubes.

Two of the most prevalent features of the Sierra Juárez: pine trees and clouds.

you can stay there, where you can see your patients without any problems." I still lived in El Punto, and I would go to work in Guelatao. Everyday I would go and come back. I saw patients, and sometimes, at night, deliver a baby, and then in the morning, go back to work in Guelatao. It was a lot to contend with to go back and forth to both places, but my need was great because I had to support my children that were in school. They were studying professional careers.

After I went to live at Don Lidiondo's house, his son got married. That made for more people, and I moved out. Señor Fidel, the brother of Señor Federico, had died and his family offered me his house at El Cerezal. They told me, "You can come here; his house is there. It's empty, and we're going to fix it up." I thanked the community for their support. So they went to fix up deceased Señor Fidel's house, and I went to live at El Cerezal.

Patients would come from San Matías, Zoquiapan, El Punto, Las Ánimas, Ixtepeji, San Miguel and from Latuvi. I had a lot of reinforcement because that ranch was at a crossroads where people would come from different places.

Once established, I delivered many babies and I continued to do what I always did. I would go to Guelatao, then I would get home at night to El Cerezal to see my patients. Or when I had mothers



Doña Enriqueta con su nieta Zaira, la generación futura de su familia.

Doña Enriqueta with her granddaughter Zaira, the future generation of her family.

that were pending a birth, I'd say to myself, "Today she's going to have that baby and I must be there." I would talk to the director at Guelatao and say, "Forgive me, but even if you dock me that day, I'm not going to be at work because I have to attend a lady." And since the director was a good man, he would say, "Don't you worry. You do your work, report in and that's all. We're not going to dock your salary because it is part of the work that you have to do in the communities."

I lived at Don Federico's deceased brother's house. Since Don Federico's family lived right in front, when patients sought me out, the family would tell them, "She'll be here tonight, or tomorrow she will return." There was always constant communication with them and they would always tell the people on what days I was in, when I would return or where I was going. People always had a point of reference.

Working at the National Indigenous Institute, I

got to know all the villages in the Sierra, starting with Ixtlán, Capulalpam, Natividad, Yiacui, Madero, La Trinidad, San Andrés Yatuni. Then I'd go to Zoogocho, Taba, Tabegua, Yojobi, and Yogueche. I went to work in all those villages to vaccinate people or to identify traditional healers. I also went to Laxopa, Yaguio, Guiloixi, Yotao, Cacalotepec, Santa Cruz Loyaguila, and San Juan Laxopa. I went as far as Josaa, Tilpepec and La Luz. I know all the villages in the region of Ixtlán like the palm of my hand because I reached them on foot all that time. There were no vehicles; everything was on foot, walking from six to ten hours.

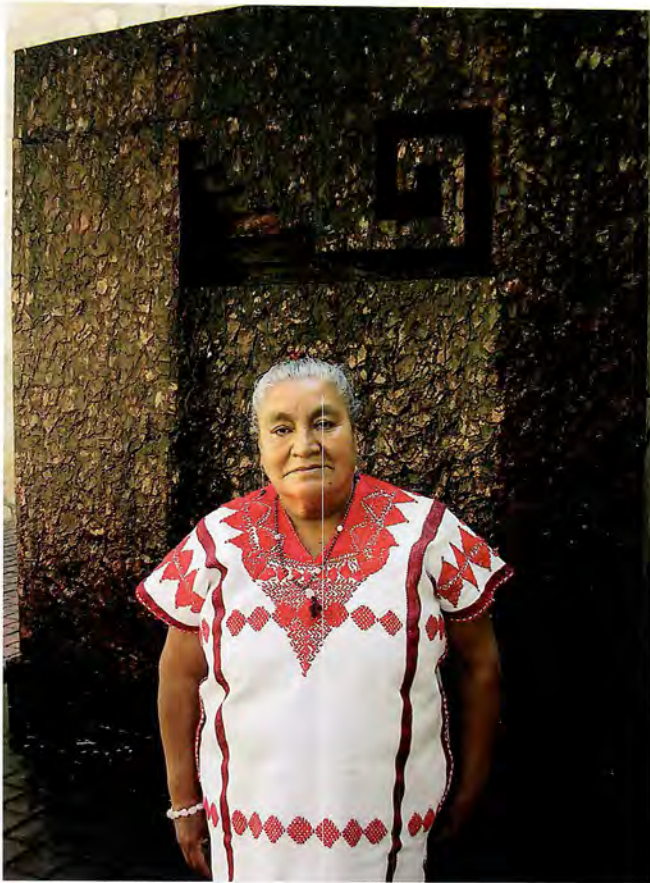
When it happened that I traveled with the director, they would take me by car. They would leave it on the roadside, as far as the car could go and then from there, we had to walk and carry supplies into the communities. That is how I came to know many communities. I got to know many traditional healers, midwives, herbalists, masseurs, bonesetters, snake and corn shamans,⁶ and other soothsayers. That was my work. From each one, I learned different things, and then I would put it into practice.

While I was at the NII, a doctor named José Luis Ortiz Alfallo came on staff at the Institute. I had my pharmacy of plants that I used for my patients whenever they used our services. When he was there, he would maliciously dig up my plants. Problems ensued between us.

I spoke to the director and told him that I did not want to get angry with this man. The things that he did to me were a lack of respect. "If I have my plants there, it's because I know what I am going to use them for," I told the director.

When I went to do fieldwork, and I returned to the NII, I no longer had my medicines. I got frustrated and angry, and I told the director what was happening. "Either my work is respected or I am going to leave because I can't fight with this man." Since that malicious doctor was supposedly in charge of health workers, as our supervisor, I had to respect him. I told my director, "If he wants me to respect him, then he has to respect my work. Don't think this is easy; my work is also valuable. He

6 Corn shamans diagnose illnesses using corn.



Doña Enriqueta frente a la fuente del maestro Francisco Toledo en el patio del Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca.

Doña Enriqueta in front of the fountain by the artist Francisco Toledo in the patio of the Ethnobotanical Gardens of Oaxaca.

has his profession, but I also have mine.” To avoid this situation, one day the director told me, “Well, see what you can do about it.” I replied, “Well, if I don’t have your support, then I am going to call the regional authorities.”

So, I telephoned Dr. Ignacio Bernal, then chief of the Health and Traditional Medicine Department of the NII in Oaxaca, and also state coordinator for programs in Health and Traditional Indigenous Medicine. I told him, “See here Doctor Bernal, I no longer want to be in Guelatao. There are problems with this doctor Alfallo, and if my work is not respected, I have no business being there. I can do my work without relying on anyone.” Dr. Bernal told me, “Let me call the state coordinator and anthropologist Mr. Carlos Zollá in Mexico City.”

The anthropologist Mr. Carlos Zollá was the

sub director of Health and Well being in the central offices of the National Indigenous Institute in Mexico City and the coordinator for all of Mexico regarding health and traditional medicine. Dr. Bernal spoke with him to bring him up to speed. The anthropologist Zollá called Dr. Bernal back and said, “Bring Doña Queta to Oaxaca City. Doña Queta cannot leave the National Indigenous Institute. If there are problems with the NII authorities in Guelatao, then bring her down to the state offices and find work for her there.” And so they transferred me. The doctor in Guelatao inadvertently did me a favor. They reassigned my position to Oaxaca City.

I went to work at the state headquarters. I continued doing the same fieldwork I did from Guelatao but now from Oaxaca. My [regional] responsibilities expanded to include other communities like Huautla de Jiménez, all the surrounding villages like San Antonio, San Andrés, San José Tenango, Árnica, many villages that are in the Huautla region. Additionally, I also served the Jamiltepec region, the Triques’ region, Mixteca highlands, Mixteca lowlands, María Lombardo, Tuxtepec, Yojoivi, San Mateo del Mar, Juchitán, Tehuantepec and Matías Romero. I know all those communities because I continued to identify midwives and traditional healers. Santa Cruz



Monumento de Benito Juárez en Oaxaca: “El respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz”.

Benito Juárez monument in Oaxaca: “Respect for another’s rights is the path to peace.”

Textitlán, Santa Cruz Temextitlán, and Santa Cruz Tepetotutla were on the way to Tuxtepec. Villages that took up to eleven hours to reach on foot because that blessed village was so far in, where the district of Tuxtepec [Veracruz] meets the district of Ixtlán [Oaxaca].

I got to know the area around Golden Hill Dam in the Papaloapan region close to the state of Veracruz. I offered support to the local people because they did not want the dam to be constructed. There was on going botanical research in that stretch of area [by a biologist from the government]. At that site, many medicinal plants were identified that cannot be found anywhere else in the world. It was very sad because many people died from that ecological imbalance that they [the government contractors] caused. The locals called me to do healing ceremonies and rituals. I got to know many people from those areas like San Martin Buenavista, Las Margaritas, Tiger Creek, a village that could be reached only through [the village of] Temascal. Once in Temascal, they would hire a boat or a canoe, whichever was available. The men would take me on the boat teeter tawtering across the lake.

It was a very good experience for me because one learns to value life. One values the importance that life has and one sees things from another point of view: poverty, a disastrous government system, politics, and how the government takes advantage of poor people. I was very grateful to the National Indigenous Institute because I got to know many places in the state of Oaxaca and outside of the state.

In 1989, a group of nineteen Mexican midwives from different states was invited to El Paso, Texas, to demonstrate traditional midwifery techniques in the United States. The Light of Maternity [*Maternidad La Luz*] hosted me. They split up the midwives according to their specialties. I did my work and it was well received. I came to know the organization of midwives: MANA [Midwives Alliance of North America]. They enrolled me into that organization so that I could attend conferences that they held every year in different parts of the United States.

Little by little, through the help I received, I arranged my visa for the first time, and I began to travel internationally. I was very thankful to my

colleague and friend, the professional midwife Laura Cao Romero, who always supported me financially and emotionally. The doors opened for me. There were many people who supported me in doing what I liked to do. Many people encouraged me to continue doing what I knew best.

It was a great opportunity because unfortunately, people in the villages view the role of a woman very differently. It is a cruel reality for them for a woman to leave her village, leave her home and family, to seek new horizons. It is the lowest point to which a woman can fall. But for me, I did not take it like that. I was always conscious of the fact that one day I was going to be somebody in life. And what I could not have as a young woman, I can have at any moment today.

In spite of the years that have gone by, in spite of everything, now that my children are grown, they have come to know who their mother is. I appreciate that my children give me my place and that people respect me. I do my work according to the needs of the people. When I see that people do not want to choose in their best interest, I cannot do much more than offer suggestions and speak from my own experiences.

One has a long road to travel in life, and I am grateful to God. On one hand, I did not have the opportunity to go to school, but on the other hand I have a university of life that taught me how to raise myself, by my own means, with all the challenges placed before me, even with bullets whizzing past by my side. And the moment came when I almost drowned in the rivers, I crossed them on cane bridges to take another footpath, but I am still here. And, proof of it, when one sets out to be someone in life, one can accomplish it with or without money. Because many people think that until they have lots of money, they can't do anything. It's not like that. Sometimes, it's not the money that counts, but the decision that we have to make to be someone in life in order to help others. All of us, at birth, are born with a gift and that gift is a God given gift. Many people don't know how to handle it, and they use it for another purpose: to do bad things, hurting others, causing injury. But not me, my goal is always to be with the people, to do what is within my reach and to offer the little that I have.

Frankly, as I walk this road of life, I have learned from my grandparents, and from the elders who weren't my grandparents. I consider them as if they were my grandparents because when I was given away, the people who supported me were always the elders. They always taught us the value of respect and the extremely important value of a greeting: to greet people with a "Good morning," or a "Good afternoon." Greet our parents, greet them everyday that goes by. And to give thanks every time God puts food on our table. Why? Because if we don't offer that mutual respect that we have as human beings, we will not be respected as human beings. That's why unfortunately, in these times, we see so much destruction, so much violence, so much pain and so much loneliness. How many people are sick in their souls! Why? Because they have disconnected themselves from the most sacred element that there is: Respect!

As I tell my children, we are very poor, we have lived through many misfortunes, but thank God, because of the value of respect taught to us by our parents, our grandparents and other people who taught us life values, thanks to them, we are where we are.

I always teach my children, that even though they have their professions, to always remember from where they came. They came from a poor family that lived with great necessity. Now that they have it all, they must return something to their people, whether family or not.

For example, respect and community values are reflected when someone is sick and we go visit them. When there is a fiesta, we all collaborate to make the fiesta happen. When someone dies, even when they are not family, we go and share in their pain, their loneliness, and their sadness. We keep vigil with the deceased. We go bury them because it is our duty as human beings.

Our communities frequently use a custom known as *el trueque*⁷ that means, "You give to me

and I give to you." Like in the Guelaguetza Fiesta that happens every year in Oaxaca. In July, the Guelaguetza represents our culture, the traditions from our villages that have many sacred places. There are many hidden treasures, I say, because when the Spaniards came in, they tried to destroy everything that we had constructed. They thought they had finished us off, but they didn't because proof of it is the fact that we are still here.

We are the Zapotecs of the Sierra Juárez. Our grandparents used to say that we were the "people of the clouds," because behind the clouds, there is clarity of life. And the basis of that clarity is the proper conduct of our elders who fought to bequeath to us the extremely important value of respect: for each other, for the family, and for the children.

Unfortunately, all these problems that we see today are the result of politics and emigration. When our people emigrate to other places, they are ashamed to say from where they came. They no longer want to say that they are Mexican, but that they are from the grand United States, as if that was such a marvelous thing.

Not for us. I am not ashamed to say that I am indian or indigenous. On the contrary, I feel proud because I know that in my veins I carry the blood of my people, and because of them, we have learned many things about respect. And always for me, that is the foundation: the respect that we take with us no matter where we go, we respect the space that offers us something to eat, the space where you have a conversation, and where you can contribute something to conscientiousness. People must raise their consciousness to find their own path, their light, and their hope to live.

We, the Zapotecs, are an ecological community that cares for the environment and nature; we have a region that is called the "United Communities," encompassing three regional municipalities and five local villages or municipal communities. Formerly, when our ancestors fought for those common lands that our grandparents now have as an inheritance, they passed on by word of mouth the need to care for what has been entrusted to us: Mother Earth, nature and everything that surrounds us.

⁷ *El trueque* [ehl-tru-EH-keh] is a traditional form of exchange among the Zapotecs that does not involve money, that is to say, an exchange of things, for example, "I give you corn and you give me sugar," or viceversa.

My people organized all these villages, and when they reach an agreement, everyone participates, men and women, for the collective benefit of all. When there is *tequio* [community service], both men and women collaborate because they have a voice and a vote. And in our villages the citizens name or elect our administrators through a democratic community assembly. Outside politicians do not enter to determine who is going to be assembly president or community administrator. We ourselves name our own authorities that begin at the lowest position such as police and go all the way up to municipal president or mayor. A village administrator must be respected because the people appoint them. If the appointed administrator does not follow the ordinances that have been agreed upon prior, he or she does not carry out their term. If the villagers see that the administrator does not show proper protocol, the villagers remove him or her. Then they name another replacement that can watch over the interests of our community.

These are villages where people are taught as children to cooperate for the collective good: sweep your street, plant little trees, and take care of Mother

Nature. Everyone is focused. No one has time to get into trouble. Children have a lot of work to do in order to learn how to survive.

Another extremely important value is that of interrelationship. Primarily, from the nucleus of our family, how are we organized within the family-- what type of upbringing we, as parents, give our children-- because the foundation is in the home. Teachers are our children's second parents. We, as mothers and fathers, have the obligation of teaching our children how to be good children. Why? If we don't give them a basic education, later on our children will not understand the errors that they commit: errors that become horrors. If a child commits an error and the parent does not correct them, it will get worse.

The importance of our villages is in how we discipline or educate one another. And the people that definitely do not want to join us in this circle, they are taken to the crossroads and told, "God bless you. See where you are going to go, because you cannot stay here." That is to say, they are expelled. They can no longer come to or live in their community. And that is our story.



HOMAGE

[Editor's Note: Doctor Ignacio Bernal Torres, M.D.¹ is a surgeon, midwife and professor of traditional indigenous medicine in Oaxaca, Mexico. He was a colleague of Doña Enriqueta's, for more than two decades, in intercultural health, traditional, and indigenous medicine, and in the 'Maternity without Risk' program.]

The lives of the Zapotec midwife-herbalist Enriqueta Contreras Contreras and of the Mazatec priestess healer María Sabina García² have many traits in common. Both lives are worthy of admiration and recognition because they represent impoverished indigenous women who have fought with intensity to come out ahead in life. They have succeeded even to the degree that they have transcended national borders. They dignify and raise Oaxacan and Mexican women to the level of other

1 Advisor to the State Council of Indigenous Doctors of the State of Oaxaca A.C. (CEMITO A.C.); Physician for Social and Indigenous Health Services of Oaxaca SSO; National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Populations CDI; Professor of Traditional, Intercultural and Social Medicine at the Southeast Regional University of Oaxaca; Surgeon and Midwife from the University of Michoacán at San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Morelia, Michoacán; Masters in Social Medicine from the Metropolitan University of Xochimilco; Masters in Nutrition from Benito Juárez University in Oaxaca.
2 María Sabina García (July 22, 1894 - November 22, 1985) was a Mazatec indigenous woman from the northern part of Oaxaca who became one of Mexico's most famous modern-day curandera-shamans. She was often referred to as the priestess-wise woman of the medicinal mushrooms. Together with Gordon Wasson, they founded the study of ethnomycology, a branch of ethnobotany.

outstanding women from around the world.

Both women were born in Mexican rural environments in scarcity and poverty that presented all the adversities of life: limited well-being as well as limited human and social development. Both are indigenous Oaxacans. They did not have the opportunities of education, as it should have been, and as it should be. Doña Queta studied a few years in elementary school, and María Sabina was not even sent to school.

Early in their childhoods, both young girls cared for herds of sheep or goats. They were like Benito Juárez,³ hungry, working children who got to know their natural habitats by consuming edible and medicinal plants in order to survive. Additionally, they received from their ancestors the knowledge and indigenous practices from pre-Hispanic times transmitted from generation to generation.

These marvelous women keep their traditions alive because both, as mothers of children and keepers of their own culture, do it responsibly and with reason. With great sacrifice, they educate their children to have respect for other people's rights, teaching them to fight for peace and for indigenous autonomy and identity.

These great women transcend their time, as living examples, by how they excel in life, in their thinking, in their philosophies, in their way of being every day.

Both healers are sought out and consulted by individuals of all ages, sexes and social conditions, with physical, spiritual and social deficiencies, at the local, community, national and international levels. Their clients find a positive and healing response that goes beyond a simple doctor-patient relationship. They come to have encounters with

3 Don Benito Juárez (1806-1872) one of Mexico's most important personages, was the first, and to date, the only president of Mexico of indigenous descent, in this case a Zapotec from the Sierra Juárez. He is remembered fondly for his humble origins, his reforms, and for the dignity which he gave to Mexico on the world stage when they were confronted by foreign invaders, saying "Respect for another's rights is peace, respect among men, as among nations, is peace."

their ancestors, with their own minds, with their own spirit, with the gods, with Mother Earth, and with the universe. These healers should be called universal shamans with no regard for the language or culture of those who consult with them, as it could be a Mixtec⁴ singer, a Mexican-American artist, a Zapotec, a Mixe, an urban dweller from Oaxaca or Mexico City, or even people from very distant cultures and countries.

Both women are teachers who share their knowledge with Mexican citizens and foreigners who truly want to learn, assisted by love, humanity,

4 Mixtec and Mixe are other indigenous populations in Oaxaca.

and cultural sensitivity. They are ready to help their fellow men and women in a world that is self-destructing, always protecting Mother Earth, nature, indigenous culture, and their traditions that benefit humanity.

Finally, both women have inspired other individuals to write books, histories, anecdotes, life stories, and other literature that should remain for posterity and future generations, as in the case of this book. Congratulations. Do they deserve homage in life and posthumously? Without a doubt. With Doña Queta, let us do it in life, we still have time. With María Sabina, we invite you to Huautla de Jiménez, Oaxaca, every July twenty-second, to celebrate her birthday.

With love, respect
and admiration,

Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres, M.D.
Oaxaca, Mexico

“Esta gran mujer se ha adelantado y trascendido a su tiempo”.

Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres

“This great woman has transcended her time.”

Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres, M.D.



EPILOGUE

“Affirmation of life is the spiritual act by which man ceases to live unreflectively and begins to devote himself to his life with reverence, in order to raise it to its true value.”¹ Albert Schweitzer won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952 for his tireless dedication to humanitarian causes. One of his important but little known contributions to Western society was the concept of “reverence for life,” which he developed as a consequence of his experiences in Africa. “The phrase ‘reverence for life’ translates as ‘to be in awe of the mystery of life;’ these words came to Schweitzer on a boat trip in equatorial Africa while he was searching for a *universal concept of ethics* [my italics] for our time.”²

Ironically, this concept of ethics known as “reverence for life” has been a fundamental concept intrinsic to the Zapotec lineage for thousands of years.³ Doña Enriqueta Contreras carries this concept like her own DNA. The following four principles are the basis of Zapotec morality: a belief that everything has life; a belief in Mother Nature and reverence for her; a belief in the importance of all our ancestors and reverence for them; and a belief in the inseparable symbiosis between Mother Nature and human beings.

1 Albert Schweitzer *Out of My Life and Thought: An Autobiography* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: New York), 1933, p.158

2 See www.Wikipedia.org “Reverence for Life”

3 Marcus, Joyce and Ken V. Flannery “Ancient Zapotec Ritual and Religion” in *Ancient Civilizations of MesoAmerica*, M. Smith and M. Masson, eds. (Malden, Massachusetts), 2000, p. 403

Doña Enriqueta tells us “our grandparents used to say that we were the ‘people of the clouds’ because behind the clouds there is clarity of life. And the basis of that clarity is the proper conduct of our elders, who fought to bequeath to us that extremely important value called respect: for each other, for the family, and for the children. We need to care for what has been entrusted to us, that is Mother Earth, nature and everything.”

Dr. Schweitzer concurs with this vital connection as well. “As a being in an active relationship to the world, he comes into a spiritual relation with it by not living for himself alone, but by feeling himself one with all life that comes within his reach.”⁴

Doña Enriqueta and Dr. Schweitzer both lament the disconnection that has taken place in the 20th century that could end up in the extinction of the human race. Doña Enriqueta asserts, “Unfortunately, in these times, we see so much destruction, so much violence, so much pain and so much loneliness. How many people are sick in their souls? Why? Because they have disconnected themselves from the most sacred element that there is: respect.” Schweitzer wrote in 1915, “The connection between civilization and attitude toward life became clear to me. I recognized that catastrophe of civilization stemmed from a catastrophe in this attitude. The ideals of true civilization had become powerless, because the idealistic attitude toward life in which they are rooted had gradually been lost to us.”⁵

Fortunately for us, both Doña Enriqueta and Dr. Schweitzer believe in the hope that humanity can redeem this disastrous situation. Doña Enriqueta concludes “for me, it is basic, the respect that we take no matter where we go, that we respect the space that offers us something to eat, the space where we have a conversation, and where you can contribute something to conscious truth. People must find their truth in order to find their own path, their light and their hope for life.” Schweitzer concurs “if we only begin again to reflect at all on ethics and our spiritual relation to the world, we are already on the road which leads back from

4 Schweitzer, p. 231

5 Ibid. p.149.

uncivilization to civilization.”⁶ “Reverence for life affords me my fundamental principle of morality, namely, that good consists in maintaining, assisting and enhancing life and to destroy, to harm or to hinder life is evil.”⁷

Although separated by nearly a century, the words of Doña Enriqueta Contreras and Albert Schweitzer resound with haunting similarity. They

give us timely advice that could inspire us to rescue our world from an impending global holocaust. We hope we will be capable of seriously heeding this warning.

This book is dedicated to every human being who strives to make a conscious and respectful connection with life whether it is in plant, mineral, animal or human form.

6 Ibid. p.198.

7 See www.Wikipedia.org “Reverence for Life”

The Four Zapotec Principles and Essential Oils

- I. Everything has life and deserves great respect.
- II. Reverence for our ancestors.
- III. Reverence for Mother Nature.
- IV. Interrelationship between human beings and Mother Nature.

Doña Enriqueta knows the value of essential oils. She uses them in her practice when she can come by them or whenever therapeutic grade essential oils are readily available. When I first mentioned the oils, Doña Enriqueta remarked, “I know of them, but are they pure?” I smiled and assured her that they were indeed pure, potent and of high energetic frequency. They are pure because they are therapeutic grade, that is to say, they can be used in a therapeutic context, they are potent because of the organic growing and precise distillation processes, and they are of high frequency because the electrical charge present in the oils range from 50-350mhz. Doña Enriqueta has been working with herbs,

both dry and fresh, for over sixty years, but she remarks that she integrates essential oils into her practice when she can access them.

Essential oils support and resonate harmoniously with the philosophy of the Four Zapotec Principles. First, they exemplify the relationship between Mother Nature and humans because we defer to her in search of natural medicines. Also, they support the thinking that everything has life, since they come from live plants and they are the living energy of nature, making them so powerfully effective in therapeutic practice. They originate directly from Mother Nature and are processed for human and animal use. Finally, the oils celebrate the relationship between the ancient knowledge of indigenous elders and their sacred connection to the Mother Earth. Essential oils form part of the compendium of medicines still in use today by traditional practitioners in the healing of the sick.



Esta gran mujer se ha adelantado y trascendido a su tiempo por lo que destaca en vida, por su pensamiento, su filosofía, y por su forma de proceder en la vida cotidiana con el ejemplo.

This great woman has transcended her time, as a living example, by how she excels in life, her thinking, her philosophy and her way of being every day.

Dr. Ignacio Bernal Torres

En el Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca tenemos una deuda de respeto y cariño con Doña Enriqueta Contreras. Junto con dos compañeras suyas, también promotoras de la medicina indígena, ella fue parte del Consejo Consultivo que guió y asesoró la creación del Jardín a partir de 1994. Doña Queta ha defendido este proyecto con la misma pasión con la que cura a sus pacientes. Las plantas y los trabajadores del Jardín vivimos agradecidos con ella.

We, at the Ethnobotanical Gardens of Oaxaca, owe a debt of respect and love to Doña Enriqueta Contreras. Along with two other colleagues in traditional indigenous medicine, she was a part of the advisory board that evaluated and guided the creation of the Gardens in 1994. Doña Queta has defended this project with the same passion with which she cares for her patients. The plants and the employees of the Garden live in gratitude to her.

**Alejandro de Ávila Blomberg, Director
Jardín Etnobotánico de Oaxaca, México
Ethnobotanical Gardens of Oaxaca, Mexico**



María Margarita Návar nació en El Paso, Texas. En los años setenta, se mudó a Austin para estudiar idioma y literatura española, francesa e italiana en la Universidad de Texas, recibéndose con la distinción cum laude. Después de tomar un curso en folclor, ella se dio cuenta de que podría estudiar su propia cultura mexicana a través de la disciplina del folclor, en el departamento de antropología. María Margarita siempre ha sentido una inclinación hacia la medicina tradicional y la curación. Su abuelo materno fue sobador empírico. Hoy en día ella es una antropóloga independiente y una masajista registrada. Actualmente, ella combina el folclor con la medicina natural al documentar la extraordinaria vida y la sabiduría botánica de su maestra Doña Enriqueta Contreras, una curandera zapoteca de Oaxaca, México.

Mary Margaret Návar was born in El Paso, Texas. In the early seventies, she relocated to Austin to major in Spanish, French and Italian Languages and Literature at the University of Texas graduating cum laude. After taking an elective course in folklore, she realized she could obtain a Masters Degree by studying her own Mexican culture through the discipline of Folklore in the Department of Anthropology. Mary Margaret has always had a strong inclination towards folk medicine and healing. Her maternal grandfather was a traditional sobador (folk masseur and bonesetter). She is now an independent anthropologist and licensed massage therapist. Currently, she combines Folklore and natural medicine by documenting the extraordinary life and botanical knowledge of her mentor, Doña Enriqueta Contreras, a Zapotec curandera from Oaxaca, Mexico.



ISBN 978-0-578-05747-7



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