

Report about my Internship in Oaxaca, Mexico

Introduction

Through the Project Module “*Forschen und Handeln im transnationalen Kontext*” of Professor Johannes Kniffki, I was fortunate to do my *Praxissemester* with 9 other students in Oaxaca, Mexico. The civil organization I joined to do my internship is called ODHON, *Organización Indígena de Derechos Humanos de Oaxaca*, which means: Indigenous Organization for Human Rights in Oaxaca. Through this organization I was mostly doing my research in an indigenous community, which was situated in the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca. The indigenous population of about 2'000-3'000 are called Chatino and speak the language of the same name as well as Spanish. The village is one of the 570 municipalities in the district of Juquila, on top of a mountain 1'960 above sea level.

Preparation

Before actually arriving in Mexico with my two feet on the ground, it was quite a stressful period full of organization and many doubts. The organization had mostly to do with funding - how will I survive 6 months there without working? – but also with housing, flight booking, paperwork for the University, for the project, finishing all the courses and work. So before leaving I was almost regretting to have put myself in this situation. I was starting to doubt about my decision, also because I have been so much abroad and thought it was time to settle down. I was mad at myself of having put myself in so much stress as I knew I had to leave my flat and my job as well. I was basically thinking too much about my little comfort in Berlin... At the end I was able to fund my internship with having 3 jobs, help of PROMOS to pay a bit of my flight and a family member who also pitched in. But once there, the stress miraculously vanished and everything changed in a heartbeat. I never thought about money, paper work, or even Berlin, I was somewhere else and so happy to be there!

In Oaxaca, Mexico

Once in Oaxaca city, I was feeling really good and excited. I didn't feel much of a culture shock as I had already been in Latin America and spoke well the language. I didn't need any time to adjust really, even the food was no problem, I was just very excited and wanted to live something that would take me out of my comfort zone. I was looking forward to learning through unknown things. So I really wanted to go out of the structure of a city and discover other communities and cultures - I wanted to go to an indigenous community and learn from them. My research subject was based on traditional healing methods and health in general, so it was important that I join a *pueblo* (village). Through a contact in ODHON, I had the possibility to go to San Juan Quiahije, a Chatino community living far south on top of a mountain, quite isolated from the outside. In Mexico in general most things are uncomplicated and informal, so when I shared my wish to go to an indigenous community, one woman working there told me I could go to her family's house and live there for a while and help out a friend of hers, Irene, with a community project. This said, three weeks later I took a 6-hour bus ride from Oaxaca city to Juquila, the closest big city to San Juan Quiahije. From there I took a collective Taxi, driving up a mountain for 40 minutes, bringing me to San Juan Quiahije

San Juan Quiahije

In the village, everybody speaks Chatino and most people understand and speak Spanish, especially the younger generation. During the car ride driving me up the

mountain to the village, I was with a few other people and I had my first contact with the community, they were only speaking in Chatino. The language is a tonal language, to my ear something close to Chinese. It was impossible to learn more than a few words as it's extremely difficult and somehow hard to catch separate words. Once in the village, I was confronted to what I was seeking for, I felt completely like a foreigner, mostly because of the way people treaded me. It is important to mention that the village has had very little visit from "white" people. It is very common to say "guera" in Mexico, which basically means white skinned. So this stroke most people, I was the only "guera" there; I really felt like a phenomenon. I went to the family house, a very welcoming and shy family, 2 daughters, one niece (her parents were migrating in the USA) and the mother. On the same day I also met Irene. She was to be the first woman to become a member of the authority in San Juan Quiahije. In many indigenous villages in Mexico, especially in Oaxaca, Chiapas and Sonora, there is a legally recognized form of self-governance called *Usos y Costumbres* or *Systema Normativa Indigena*, as a legal customary law of indigenous communities. Irene was to join the new elected authority, which changes every three years, for the Branch Culture and Recreation. The community has gone through great change in the passed 20 years as a consequence to massive migration to the USA, globalization, religious conflicts, etc. Indeed, the village is known to be the first village nationwide for the migration of workforce to the USA. Almost every family I spoke to have one or more family members migrating in different States of the USA. The dollar motivates many people to go so far and leave behind family members in the idea of building a better life, paying a house, a small business, a car. Thus, many come back influenced by a westernized culture and, in some cases, start to doubt the traditional system of the village. I was also surprised to see that in most families, which could afford it, had a television, which was quite present from what I had experienced. In the family I lived with, the television was basically always on. I felt there a general interest in having better life standards. Most families lived from remittance, and most houses there where built with money earned in the United States.

Irene's future responsibility as part of the authority was to recognize what are the important costumes and traditions of the Chatino people and how they can be preserved. She was a bit shy about what she knew, all though she seemed to know a lot, and I was also shy to impose my ideas because for me it was not important what I thought; I was there to learn. I was also really careful to respect the method and knowledge of each and everyone, as the semantic with the community was sometimes completely different. My questions mad sometimes no sense to them; I really had to put my whole logic in revue sometimes and remember that even on the littlest things which seem obvious to me, it is just my positivistic structure I'm carrying with me to the other side of the world. I can say I was sometimes quite lost in how to deal with the communication. I even got frustrated at some point in the streets with people staring at me and laughing. There was something very absurd about my presence there, for them and for me, and this was very interesting somehow. For my research, I recognized different ancestral costumes regarding health, mostly because I had never heard of them. It is hard to say what is pre-Colombian as there is no written historical documentation about the Chatino people, even very little after the Spanish Conquista. There were some very beautiful traditions and beliefs and many people would still see *curanderos* (traditional healers), as "health" is not only about body or mind, but also about your spiritual health, the health of your soul. Superstitions and curses such as *mal de ojo* (the evil eye) for example, are taken seriously in the village and can only be healed by a *curandero*. For all the physical

illnesses, most people go to the *centro de salud*, the state medical center. I took any story as reality, what reality it is was not important. In any case, I was careful to leave behind my European skepticism and rationalism and opened up to a whole new dimension of knowledge. It was a very enriching experience and I thank all the people there as well as my Professor and my classmates for this wonderful experience.

Returning to Berlin

The biggest culture shock I had all together was returning in the month of February to a cold and gray city. I was amazed by the suffocating silence and the untrusting looks in people's eyes, it was very hard the first weeks. I missed the crazy mix of sounds and life of Mexico (which there sometimes was too much): the loud music, the people talking loudly, the church ringing, the firecrackers and cocks singing. The easiness and unpretentious attitude of people was also very missed, but I'm slowly adjusting and am looking forward to the sunshine of the Berlin spring.