



OAXACA STORIES

IN CLOTH

by Eric Sebastian Minding

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Loveland, Colorado 80537

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When you dress, does your choice of clothing say something about you: who you are and where you belong? In many parts of the world, *clothing* means *identity*.

This used to be the case in Mexico. Each village had its own cultural identity expressed in the colors, the cut, the *huipil* dictated by tradition and custom. But this is changing. From the book's introduction we learn, "Advertising via magazines,

television and the Internet have altered peoples' views of what is attractive. Persistent shaming of indigenous cultures effectively wears away at cultural identity and pride."

Eric Minding has lived in the Mexican state of Oaxaca for twenty years, and has observed with his own eyes – and with understandable distress – the decline of this incredible textile wealth. Eric calls clothing in Oaxaca "the flags of their communal heritage on their shoulders." Rather than just watching this happen, Eric took his camera in hand and acted.

Over a period of two years, through jungle and over mountain, he traveled to nearly all corners of the Oaxaca he had grown to love and photographed this heritage before it disappears. What a loss that would be! "Clothing is a language through which a people can tell stories about themselves, their community, and their place in the universe." History and tradition are heavy in the details of a *huipil*. "Nothing was random. Color, symbol, image and design; all carried meaning and spoke to everyone, including the divine observers."

The resulting book is a collection of photographs and accompanying text that can effortlessly transport the reader to Oaxaca. Rich descriptions of the people he met, the countryside he traversed, the stories he heard gives us a book not only of documentation, but of heart. These photos are not shot in a studio, but in real life settings, smoke spiraling up behind the subjects in their dark home, in the operation of their work, carrying wood, or spinning cotton. In many cases the lighting kisses the face and catches the profile, or includes a dramatic sky as a secondary subject in a landscape composition. The most powerful impression the photographs convey is the incredible *dignity* of the subjects wearing their traditional clothing.

Said one village leader, "These images and the book will outlive all of us. It will stand as a document that our children and grandchildren can look to, to understand where they come from, their heritage in this changing world, and the style their ancestors once had."

Another story is told of a man's mother who refused to stop weaving the traditional *huipil*, even in the face of the Westernization of the clothing seen in the city. She was keeping alive the stories in the designs as they were meant to be. When another wise woman heard of this, she exclaimed that the mother should be blessed under the sun, the moon, and the stars because what she was doing was important. If that's the case, Eric Minding should be blessed as well.

*Reviewed by Marilyn Romatka
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