

The Ceremonial Soup That Sustains a Culture

In one Oaxaca town, a three-day process of slaughtering and cooking pigs is essential to an Indigenous changing-of-the-guard event.

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Four fat pigs lounge in the dappled shade of Isidro Pérez Pérez's backyard, each tethered to its own tree by a thin rope looped around a back foot. The pigs don't yet know it, but soon they'll be the stars of the ceremonial soup at the center of San Mateo Yetla's annual Cambio del Bastón de Mando, or what English speakers might think of as the changing of the guard.

As the outgoing Fiscal, the community's top political and social authority, Pérez will host a series of events over the next three days, including a ritual pig slaughter, communal cooking and meals, a candlemaking ceremony and a late-night dance party with a live band. The festivities will culminate in a group procession to the local church, where a religious service precedes the official handover of duties to the incoming Fiscal and other community leaders.

Though civic power is transferred administratively each January 1, Yetla's transfer ritual is mandated locally for January 6. According to some community members, their ancestors prescribed the date to ward off the frequent death of infants, which had devastated the pueblo in a

past so distant that it is lost to memory. Curiously, in the Catholic liturgical calendar, January 6 is also Three Kings' Day, which alludes to the biblical story of children being hidden from King Herod, who—upon learning of the birth of Jesus—had ordered the killing of all boys in Bethlehem under the age of 2, to prevent the prophesied king of the Jews from taking over his throne. In many parts of Mexico, including this region, Three Kings' Day is celebrated by baking a loaf of sweet bread with a tiny doll hidden inside.

Though the Mexican government has sought to separate religious and civic life since La Reforma (The Reform) in the 19th century, the codependence among these entities persists in Indigenous and rural communities.

In order to carry out the cambio de bastón on January 6, two days of preparation are required: one to slaughter the pigs for the feast, and another to pour and cool the candles used in the ceremonial transfer of power.

This annual festival offers a clear demonstration of the combination of religious elements, social organization,