

# EL TINACAL

## *A Ritual Mexican Space*

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From the time I was a very small boy, through friends of my father, I went to a few haciendas in the states of Puebla and Tlaxcala. Curiosity and the sheer number of my visits initiated me into the culture of *pulque*.

There, I encountered the maguëy. Not only is its sap used to make *pul-*

*que*: the *ichtli* fibers from its leaves are used for weaving; its stalks are used as roofing (a few examples of this can be found today in the Mezquital Valley); and its stiff needle-like thorns were traditionally used for self-sacrifice by the Aztecs.

The maguëy is also used to fence in fields, mark off boundaries and hold up walls. It makes good firewood; its trunk, or *quióte*, doubles as girders and beams in building; its leaves were

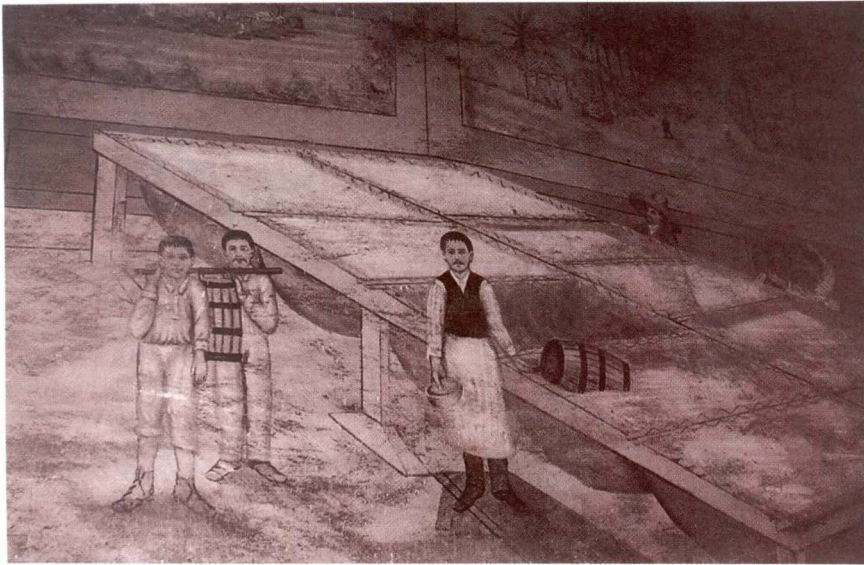
pressed to make paper, footwear, cord and coarse cloth; its sap provided honey, sugar and vinegar, just as Motolinía wrote in his *Florentine Codex*.<sup>1</sup>

One of the many varieties of this agave —also called *metl* by the ancient Mexicans— still yields the raw ingredient for mescal and the world

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<sup>1</sup> Friar Toribio de Benavente, a Franciscan monk who the American indigenous peoples called Motolinía ("the poor one"). [Editor's Note.]





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famous tequila. But in Mexico's central plateau, the maguey was used mainly to obtain *octli* or *pulque*, the traditional beverage linked to most of daily life as well as both secular and sacred festivities.

Most of the common people drank only *aguamiel*, the sap straight from the plant which is barely fermented at all. The fermented beverage, *pulque*, was the privilege of the old, pregnant women and some officials among the warrior class.<sup>2</sup>

With the emergence of the hacienda system in the colonial period, *pulque* production flourished and consequently the limits on its consumption disappeared.<sup>3</sup> To this effect, the Crown approved the *pulque* ordinances in its Royal Decree of July 6, 1672.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Sonia Corcuera de Mancera, *Entre gula y templanza* (Mexico City: Imprenta Aldina, 1979), 81.

<sup>3</sup> The hacienda was a feudal form of land ownership and production that developed during the colonial period (1521-1810), and lasted until the beginning of this century. [Editor's Note.]

<sup>4</sup> Sonia Corcuera de Mancera, *El fraile, el indio y el pulque* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1993), 125.



The *aguamiel* was transported to tubs in the *tinacales* or fermenting sheds, which, according to Don Manuel Payno, "were large, well ventilated galleries, where the leather tubs stored the precious liquid to be fermented and a drop of fine *pulque* added to the mixture" [to start the process].

These buildings were built in three different forms. Some were rectangles that were part of the main group of buildings of the hacienda; this is the case of the Xala and Santiago Tetlapecyac Haciendas. Others

were circular or polygons situated within the walls of the hacienda but far enough away from the other structures so as to be able to allow for freedom of movement and good ventilation and to avoid sullyng the rest of the hacienda with their strong odor or bothering them with their bustle. The third kind was completely independent from the main buildings of the hacienda, in a strategic place in the countryside that would allow for the *tlachiqueros*<sup>5</sup> to make their runs and put *pulque* distribution and sale well within the reach of wayfarers, travelers and local residents on the roadside.

The vats in San Antonio Ometusco and Santiago Tetlapecyac boast striking frescos depicting the cultivation and exploitation of maguey and the distribution of *pulque* which show the sensitivity of their artists. These paintings are the forerunners of the murals that years later would be painted in urban *pulquerias*.<sup>6</sup> Painters Frida Kahlo and Juan O'Gorman both depicted them extensively.<sup>7</sup>

In a few places, like Santa María Tecajete, the traditional overseer still gives out orders in the maguey fields and two or three *tlachiqueros* survive.

The old fermenting sheds had broad porticos to give the *tlachiqueros* room for loading and unloading their 50-gallon wooden casks of *aguamiel*.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The laborers who extracted the sap from the maguey and took it to the fermenting sheds.

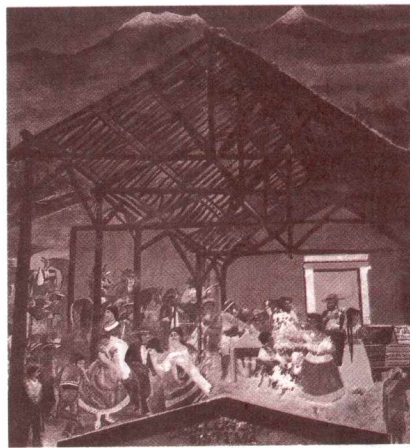
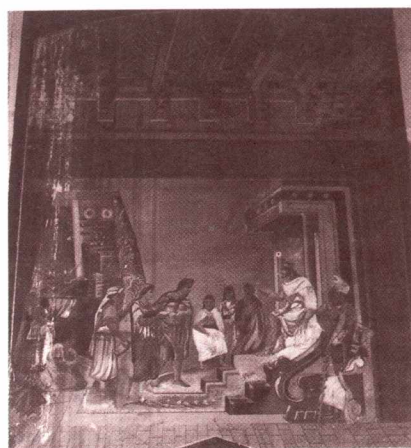
<sup>6</sup> Bars that specialize in *pulque*. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>7</sup> Raúl Guerrero, *El pulque* (Mexico City: SEP-INAH, 1980), 124-125.

<sup>8</sup> Goatskin bags were also used as recipients.



*Few pulquerías survive, but they have lost most of their authenticity, their homey, Mexican flavor.*



With the coming of the railway, loading platforms were built, like the one at San Antonio Ometusco, where the animal-drawn carts were loaded to take the *pulque* to the closest railroad station.<sup>9</sup>

Today, only rarely do *pulque* producers sing the Ave Marías or the *alabados*,<sup>10</sup> or hymns, as they used to

be sung at the beginning and the end of the day. The overseer can no longer be heard to cry, “Long live Our Lady of Guadalupe!” as he pours in the new *aguamiel* to make the *pulque* and the answering cries of “Viva!” from the workers.

Today, the only employees are the overseer and the *tlachiqueros*. The *guarda-tandas*,<sup>11</sup> captains,<sup>12</sup> *tineros*,<sup>13</sup>

the measurers<sup>14</sup> and the general dogs-bodies have all disappeared.

A few *pulquerías* also survive, but they have lost most of their authenticity, their homey, Mexican flavor. Gone are the colorful floors with tinted sawdust; the barmaid elegantly attired in traditional *china poblana* dress; the little clay soldiers and toys made of pounded brass given out as prizes; the raucous games of *rayuela*, *rento* and *brisca*,<sup>15</sup> and the altar decorated and dedicated to Our Lady of Guadalupe on December 12.

All these things, so distinctive in our cultural and architectural identity reinforce our specificity and nationalism.

It is still possible to recover and recreate them with both institutional support and visionary investment so that, like the Marquess Calderón de la Barca, the lovers of our culture can testify to the grace and originality of Mexico’s architecture and special ritual places. ❧

<sup>9</sup> For example, a narrow path used to go from the San Antonio Ometusco hacienda to the Irolo station.

<sup>10</sup> This particular hymn was introduced into New Spain by Friar Antonio de Magril who taught the indigenous people the song that tells the story of the passion and the death of Jesus.

<sup>11</sup> The man who coordinated and registered the arrival of the *aguamiel* at the fermenting shed. [Translator’s Note.]

<sup>12</sup> The overseer’s second-in-command.

<sup>13</sup> The men who monitored and cleaned the tubs during fermentation.

<sup>14</sup> These men measured out the *pulque* for distribution when it was ready.

<sup>15</sup> All games of chance; the first is a coin-tossing game and the second two are card games.

## PULQUE, A TRADITIONAL AND SACRED DRINK

*Pulque* is a fermented drink produced from the maguey (a native Mexican agave plant) that had its boom and peak consumption among the people in Mexico during the 19th century and the beginning of this century. The emergence of beer, however, together with the disadvantage that pulque cannot be bottled because it ferments too rapidly, led to its decline as Mexico's most popular drink. As a consequence, those states where the product was once the main source of income suffered an economic decline.

From pre-Hispanic times *pulque* played a part in all aspects of daily life, the fiestas of the indigenous peoples and their religious and public life. Originally *pulque* was made and consumed only by the Indians, but Spanish colonizers and mestizos saw opportunities for personal wealth in the *pulque* business and began to industrialize the drink in the haciendas where the maguey plant was grown.

The plant produces honey-water which slides down inside maguey, the heart of the maguey which has an elliptical-shaped cavity and a circular base. The honey-water is extracted, and fermented together with the roots and tip of the plant to produce *pulque*, a nutritious drink with four degrees of alcohol, though this percentage can increase with further fermentation.

The *tlachiquero* extracts the honey-water early in the morning and again at sunset. This similarity in timing with the twice-daily milking of cows led people to dub the magueys "green cows."

As *pulque* naturally has a strong bitter flavor, it is often combined with fruit to produce a drink known as "cured" *pulque*. ❧