



Photos by Denis Jockmans

# Weathermen of the Popocatépetl

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The recent activity of Popocatepetl, the largest volcano in central Mexico, has disrupted the quiet life of the villagers of Tetela del Volcán. It is not the column of vapor coming from the crater, but the presence of dozens of scientists, soldiers and television cameras which has upset the peaceful village routine. A major eruption would not only cover the town with dust and rubble, but could trigger earthquakes, the main reason the villagers are on alert for possible evacuation.

But Tetela's inhabitants are going about life much as they always have. They feel no need to leave their homes. They are convinced that their "Popo" or "Don Grego-

rio" will never erupt, a confidence rooted in the dreams of their village's *tiemperos* or "weathermen." The *tiemperos* are shamans who speak with the volcano and bring him offerings in exchange for rain. This is a pre-Hispanic tradition that survived the cultural onslaught of the Spanish conquerors.

Tetela del Volcán warms itself in the morning sun as the streets fill with vendors and housewives. Peaches, cacti, tamales and smoked nuts change hands beneath the approving glance of the snowcapped Popocatepetl ("the smoky mountain") and the *Iztaccíhuatl* ("the sleeping woman").

Behind the village's colonial church, Doña María de los Angeles sits at her old Singer sewing machine in front of a wall covered with the figures of saints. Doña María keeps the door shut, an attempt to

keep the ubiquitous volcanic dust out of her machine. She points to two little bags. "Look, this is what I have swept from my porch in the past few weeks. But compared to the eruptions of 1925, this is nothing. Then, the whole sky was black with ashes. The eruptions came with strong earthquakes, one night the earth shook 10 times." María has lived here alone in the dark since the death of her husband six years ago. She does some sewing to make a living and looks back to happier times. "Years ago, a friend of mine, the owner of a large chain of bakeries in Cuernavaca, used to take me and the town's children to the cascades at the foot of the 'Popo.' It was a treat for the children, they loved all the pastries the baker took along. Unfortunately, we haven't been to the waterfalls

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*Tiemperos* have the power to get in touch with nature.

again. Since the accident they don't let people come near the volcano anymore."

The accident to which Doña María refers is a minor eruption that killed four young mountaineers in 1995, including María's niece. "The climbers had gotten past an army blockade and found a path to the top of the mountain. But a sudden eruption of 'Don Gregorio' surprised them; the volcano vomited ashes and stones." Doña María says the authorities found her niece "with her eyes looking towards the sky and her hands above her head, as if she wished to stop the big rock that crushed her head."

After decades of sleep, huge columns of smoke and noxious fumes announced the reawakening of the Popocatepetl in December 1994. It was the same time the peso took a free fall. The volcano certainly knows how to pick its moments. Five hundred years ago, when Cortés began his conquest of the Aztecs, the volcano also protested. According to the Spanish conquistador Bernal Díaz, big rocks rolled off its flanks and lava bubbled up out of the crater. The early days of July 1997, on the eve of the historic elections in which

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the ruling Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) was about to lose its 70-year grip on Mexican politics, the volcano covered Mexico City, more than 100 miles away, with a light coat of ash. Coincidence or not, the powerful mountain exercises a special influence on the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico and lies at the root of many myths and stories.

The most famous one says Popocatepetl was an Aztec warrior who fell in love with the Aztec Princess Iztaccíhuatl.

Not totally in favor of a match between the two young lovers, Iztaccíhuatl's father sent Popo off to war. He later told his daughter that her sweetheart had died in battle. An inconsolable Iztaccíhuatl committed suicide. When he returned and saw Iztaccíhuatl dead, Popo turned to stone

beside the lifeless body of his beloved. Promising to keep her body warm to the end of time when she will reawaken, he keeps on burning inside.

When will the Popocatepetl blow? Will it be soon? Will it ever happen? No one can tell for sure, unless of course it is Leobardo or one of the other *tiemperos* who speak to the mountain.

"I have many dreams about the volcano," Leobardo says in his Tetela home. They started when I was very young. Usually I am fast asleep when Don Gregorio [another name for the Popocatepetl] takes me to his highest peaks. There is a beautiful view above, vast and white with snow. The mountain, an old warrior, takes me to the mouth of the volcano. 'Don't get too close to the crater,' he warns. He assures me that the volcano will not explode. He'd like to, because he is angry, but his father, God in Heaven, won't permit it." Leobardo continues, "Don Gregorio isn't alone up there. He's surrounded by other spirits who rule the weather and help him with his tasks.

"Each spirit has its own function, some for the rain, others for the wind, others for hail. Everything that comes from above is their work."

To Don Leobardo and his fellow villagers, nature around him is more than a giant mechanical clock, responding to natural laws. The villagers of Tetela believe, like their ancestors, that behind every natural phenomenon is a spirit or a god, and that its divine will can be revealed in dreams. For Western man, dreams have little value. "Dreams are empty," goes the saying. For Leobardo, the images in dreams are of the same value as those seen when conscious.

Nevertheless, Leobardo makes a distinction between "senseless dreams" and visions with



a message. The latter have also a collective quality.

According to Mexican anthropologist Julio Glockner, the Aztecs used to leave important decisions to professional “dreamers” (*temiquixmiatl*). There were books that explained and interpreted the most common dream visions. Leobardo is a dreamer; he acts as a medium for the people around him, and he is consulted on major issues of sowing or harvesting.

Then there is 77-year-old Doña Gabina who also regularly dreams of the volcano.

Doña Gabina not only gathers information about the condition of the volcano and the coming of the rains; the villagers also believe she has certain powers to influence the weather and hold off hailstones from the corn fields. That is why she is called a “weatherwoman” (*tiempera* or *granicera*).

In Tetela the functions of weatherman and dreamer are closely entwined.

Clearly, those who have the power to get in touch with nature can also influence it. Often, these qualities are combined with those of a *curandero*, a traditional healer.

In the isolated communities of Mexico, traditional healers often work as the town’s doctors.

They are often elderly women, knowledgeable about medicinal herbs. Since traditional Mexican medicine distinguishes “hot diseases” from “cold diseases,” and the latter supposedly are caused by the mountains, the *tiempera* is the ideal person to prescribe remedies against traditional diseases as “the loss of one’s shadow” or “the fall of the palate” believed to cause diarrhea in infants. Doña Gabina explains, “I’m consulted for diseases from the mountains, like arthritis. I ask the mountain for healing and tell the patient which offerings



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he has to bring. Often, the cause lies with a restless spirit, so I tell the patient which spirit is bothering him. The patient can put up a cross on a hilltop with the name of the deceased on it, so the soul of the spirit can find peace there.” In fact, all around Tetela, there are wooden crosses sticking out of hills, quiet testimony to the strong influence of traditional beliefs in the village.

Doña Gabina inherited her gifts from her deceased husband, Melchor Sánchez, who was struck several times by lightning. “Once lightning fell on a dog next to him, later on a *maguey* plant and the third time on a tree. It gave him a severe shock but he survived every time.”

Lightning is an undeniable sign from God that someone is chosen to reveal heavenly secrets to other mortals.

The story is told of a woman in the nearby town of Hueyapan who as a child was struck down by lightning and seemed to be dead for more than 24 hours. She woke up at her funeral and went on to have a long career as a “weatherwoman.” Born in 1901, she died in 1997.

Because of the topography, thunder and lightning are familiar phenomena in the volcano’s neighboring villages. Every year, dozens of people die from being struck by lightning. To Doña Gabina this has its consequences. “The souls of those hit by lightning keep on wandering restlessly around the mountain tops; they can influence the weather and cause illnesses. So, they need to be appeased. The same thing happens with small children who die before being baptized: their spirits are condemned to work as a ‘weather spirit.’”

Doña Gabina’s ideas have pre-Hispanic roots. Archeologists, who dug up the remains of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, found next to the temple of the rain god Tláloc skeletons of small children who were supposedly sacrificed there. The Aztecs believed that the rain god was being assisted by little helpers or



Crosses are set up on the mountain for spirits to find peace.

*tlaloques*, with specific tasks: creating rain, hail, fog or wind.

And the spirits of the sacrificed infants were to be *tlaloques* and continue the weather's task.

In Tetela it is still the custom to pray for rain, by erecting an altar with a model of the volcano, the embodiment of Tláloc, together with little figures or *tlaloques*, his helpers, made of amaranth, a grain-like plant. After the ceremony, the little figures are eaten.

It is not strange that Tetela's inhabitants see the Popocatepetl volcano as the physical manifestation of Tláloc. The "Popo's" summit is nearly always covered with fog and clouds; meteorological phenomena parallel the local animistic belief.

Doña Alejandra, Tetela's leading weatherwoman, frequently takes offerings to the foot of the mountain and conducts ceremonies there in which Popocatepetl speaks through her to the faithful. "He's a person, a very timid but sad person. Gregorio is an Aztec, you see it in the way he's dressed. You see his sandals, how scantily he's dressed. He's almost naked. He's not a Spaniard but a Mexican, like us." Whenever

Doña Alejandra gets a message through a dream, she goes with a group of followers to the foot of the volcano with offerings. She goes there every May 3 as well, a special day on the calendar of the weathermen. The day of The Holy Cross, according to the Catholic calendar, coincides with the start of the rainy season. It is important to court the mountain on that day to ensure sufficient rain for the bean and cornfields. That a pagan ceremony coincides with a Catholic observance might seem to be the height of blasphemy were it not for the fact that Christianity is not the only religion in which the cross has special meaning.

For the Aztecs the cross was an important symbol. A bad joke from the devil, as the missionaries in the sixteenth century saw it, but at the same time a practical tool to help with Christian indoctrination. For the Aztecs the cross symbolized the four cardinal points. That is why the weather spirits prefer to linger around a cross and can find peace there. In fact when a spirit is said to be causing an illness or trouble to a member of the community, the one affected has

to set up a cross for that spirit to rest on the mountain.

One follower explains why the Popo has been grumbling and spewing smoke for the past months. "The Popo is the navel of the world, through which the earth breathes. The mountain is mad at the people who climbed its flanks or made it explode from the inside."

This strange explanation of the rise in volcanic activity is based on the 1919 dynamiting of the volcano to facilitate the extraction of sulfur. An ill-fated decision, since the big eruptions and earth tremors of the 1920s are attributed to those incidents.

Old and new myths mingle in Tetela, like the ash clouds mixing with the atmosphere. At the base of folk belief lies the philosophy that nature ought to be respected; and if it is not, it takes revenge. It is not important if the offerings to the volcano have the desired effect. For the inhabitants of Tetela, their ceremonies and homage to the volcano are first and foremost a continuation of time-honored tradition and a symbol of the way they see their place in the nature of things. ■■■