

# The Eastern Tepehua Shamans Traditional Healers and Diviners Who Make Women and Old Men

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To begin the "custom," the shaman puts the paper dolls on the altar.  
Pisaflores, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.

Like other Native American practices, the ritual cycle of the Eastern Tepehua from northern Veracruz follows the corn-based agricultural calendar, articulating times that alternate according to the different categories of the dead with whom the living relate.<sup>1</sup> Planting time, the moment when the first seedlings burst forth, and the harvest are marked in rites led by different specialists, with ritual participants from households, from neighborhoods, or from the community as a whole. Nevertheless, not all Tepehua rites are directly linked to the pro-

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duction of the Mesoamerican grain; some are completely unrelated. There are rites that, although anchored in the annual ritual cycle, appear in the Catholic ritual, and, instead of referring to peasants and corn fields, make saints their central reference points. There are also therapeutic rituals, and others belonging to the cycle of life. And finally, there are rites derived from the community's civic and political activity, and those which, in the same way, link the local with all three levels of government (municipal, state, and federal).

Among the various kinds of Tepehua rituals, shamans are specialists in the agricultural, therapeutic, and cycle-of-life rituals (called "customs" or *Jalakitúntin*), always preceded by a cleansing ritual (*Katalakapaáú*). These "cleansings" have what we could call a standardized protocol, in the sense that they almost always tend to be the same, regardless of the kind of "custom" that follows. The "cleansing" takes place in the patio



As part of a "cleansing," the shaman sacrifices a young chicken on the head of a young migrant to favor a good journey that he will begin the next day to Tamaulipas. San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.

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To begin the "cleansing," the shaman puts a floral offering on the paper dolls. San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.

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of the house or oratory where the shaman's rite is carried out, frequently from midday until a little before or after sundown.

It has four objectives: first, to clean everything and everyone who participates in the ritual. Women shamans "bathe" the participants with soap, water, drinking alcohol, and a cloth, while the participants "bathe" the shamans and all the ritual paraphernalia; some shamans also "sweep" the participants with a chicken. The second objective is to offer food to the "spirits of the Earth"; for this, the women shamans bind together tree bark to make bodies. The third objective is to chase the "evil air," the pathogenic spirits of those who were murdered or died in an accident, in "misfortune," out of the human space. To do that, the male shaman passes out cut paper bodies to those beings who otherwise would be incorporeal. Once they have become corporeal on the patio floor, the male shaman offers the bad airs an offering of food, only to expel them immediately after. The fourth objective is "to raise the shadow," that is, the souls of the participants in the rite, so that the women shamans take them from the patio into the building where the "custom" will be carried out.

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"custom." Thus, among the community and agricultural "big customs" (*Kadinináu*), the "corn custom," carried out from September 15 to 16, is characterized by the simulation of building a corn field among whose stalks the participants dance. On December 31, the "custom of the Christ Child" is characterized by rocking the image of the rising sun. Among the "concerts" (*Tamá'ošamišín*), which are therapeutic "customs," emblematic of the "concert of the living" is a discussion among a patient's living relatives to discover the cause of his/her illness. In the "concert of the dead," a pair of humans loan their bodies to the souls of the dead relatives who have caused the illness, so that the ill survivor can make them an offering and ask their forgiveness by address and waiting on the bodies of the living. Among the "customs" of the cycle of life, the "bath of the dead" (*Łáti Paškán*) includes as its ritual episodes a series of passages through a rattan ring that the mourners/survivors are brushed with, plus baths in a spring. The "promises" (*Katánit*) are unique because of the repeated baths the participants give the shaman, who offers thanks for the divine gift of being able to officiate at the rituals.

In all the "customs," in addition to these varied rituals, the male shamans cut dolls out of paper (*jalasítnit*), and the women shamans tie dolls made of bark (*talaksín*, or "that which is tied"),<sup>2</sup> with the aim of giving a body to the spirits of the Earth, the celestial spirits of the living (the "stars," the alter ego of human beings), and to the spirits who are the true owners of the plants cultivated by man. With these spirits thus embodied, the shamans and ritual participants make an offering of food and, above all, of the sacrificial blood of barnyard fowl.

As they perform the “cleansings” and the “customs,” the Tepehua shamans carry out a wide variety of ritual activities in which the sexual division of labor plays an important part. Although a minor shaman rite can be carried out by a single ritual specialist, for optimum conditions a man and a woman shaman, or—even better—two women are required to guide it; this is particularly imperative when they are major “cleansings” and “customs.” Shamans are specialists of the ritual word they offer to the very different beings they relate to in the name of the human community, which makes them the heirs to an ancient Native American poetic tradition. They are true cosmic diplomats who intervene in two different kinds of social orders making it possible to connect with beings who often relate in ways that we could call unharmonious that humans not to tend notice until their consequences make themselves evident. Some Tepehua shamans recognize having received their knowledge directly from the divinities who told them of their designs through dreams in which they announced the gift that allows them to officiate in Amerindian rites. It is true, however that some women shamans began their work as midwives when faced with the urgency of the call from a woman in labor, who rightly recognized in them hints of their shaman vocation. And it happens that, in effect, among the eastern Tepehuas of San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, all the midwives are shamans, and all the shamans are midwives. In the Tepehua language they are *haat'akuunú?*, “she/he who makes women.”<sup>3</sup> The state of our research does not allow us to affirm what women she makes; we can imagine that the midwife makes a woman out of the woman in labor; the woman in labor becomes a full woman. The midwife is also called *mayúcan yumaustayanín has'adán*, which our Tepehua friends translate as “she who raises the bed” in which the woman gave birth; linguist Albert Davletshin uses the translation “she/he who raises children to a vertical position.”<sup>4</sup>

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To finish the “concert of the dead,” the shaman “signs” the bundles of bark with the blood of the sacrificed bird. El Tepetate, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.



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Shamans are health specialists; for this reason they are called “healers.” They are also called “diviners” because of their ability to recognize in the reflections of crystals or the movement of smoke produced by burning copal the signs of a future to come or a past to be revealed. In San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, where there are neither herbal experts nor bone-setters, the healer and the diviner are never confused with one who prays or the catechist, much less with a pastor or a Catholic or Orthodox priest, whose fields of ritual specialization are different. Both men and women Eastern Tepehua shamans, the performers of the “cleansing” and “custom” rites, knowledgeable in the rhetorical Amerindian arts, use dreams to communicate exceptionally with the divinities, are familiar with agricultural times, and manipulate the “seeing” time. They are true accountants of the sacred to the extent that a fundamental trait of their techniques of embodiment



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El Tepetate, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.



To finish the “promise,” the two women shamans, each at her respective altar, gather the offering to then pour the sacrificial fowl blood on the bundles of bark. San Pedro Tziltzacuapan, Ixhuatlán de Madero municipality, state of Veracruz.

involves the number of bodies they construct and the counted nature of the offerings and sacrifices they orchestrate. But, above all, they are constructors of bodies. Embodied in paper or in bark, cutting or tying anthropomorphic fetishes, by giving a body to beings who have none and who only with a body can relate in a controlled way with humans, the Tepehua men and women shamans update an art of memory that makes it possible to make the invisible visible, giving it a body, expression, and solution to illness, to the demands of the peasant form of production, and to the life crises of the human condition. Building bodies for non-human beings, the Tepehua shamans make human bodies and the souls that inhabit them viable. And perhaps this is what the Tepehua term for male shamans alludes to: *hapupaaná*, *hapupa?aná* or *haapapaaná?*, “he who makes old men/grandfathers.”<sup>5</sup> ■■■

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article will refer to Tepehua communities in Veracruz, but the Tepehua people also inhabit parts of the states of Hidalgo and Puebla.

<sup>2</sup> Alain Ichon, *La religión de los totonacas de la sierra*, José Arenas, trans., SEP/INI Collection no. 16 (Mexico City: SEP-INI, 1973 [1969]), p. 269.

<sup>3</sup> Albert Davletshin, “Notas etimológicas sobre algunos términos religiosos en el tepehua de Pisa Flores,” unpublished text, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> This information is from personal communication with Albert Davletshin in 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Albert Davletshin, op. cit.