

# Traditional Nahua Therapy

## Knowing How to See, to Dream, and to Speak

Laura Romero\*





The world is a fabric of both reciprocal and rapacious relations between the human domain and that of the Lord of the Mountain. They are permanently tied together, as when the men go out to harvest and cultivate corn, and during therapeutic rituals.



Don Ernesto (above), invoking the presence of non-human entities. Don Pedro (right), diagnosing with an egg.

For the Nahuas of the Sierra Negra (Black Mountains), human beings are just one more creature inhabiting the universe.<sup>1</sup> This extremely complex creature is part of a network of relationships established from the dawn of time among the pantheon of Catholic divinities (saints, virgins, and Christs), the Lord of the Mountain, the Siren, goblins or elves, and the dead, among others. For this reason, the Nahua environment is thought of as a series of overlapping domains, each of which demands a particular kind of behavior.

Thus, the human domain, located fundamentally in the town, is ruled by specific culinary practices (the consumption of maize, salt, and chili peppers) and kinship relations determined by *compadrazgo*,<sup>2</sup> and the prohibition of incest. In the town, patron saints and the dead cohabit, wandering through the night, in dreams, or during the celebration of All Saint's Day in late October and early November.

Outside the inhabited part of the town is the domain of the Lord of the Mountain (Tepechane, in Nahuatl), master of wild animals and all the goods housed in the immensity of the virgin forest that is the ecosystem of the lower part of the Sierra Negra. There, together with his consort, the Siren (Achane), who in her femininity controls and surveys all the goods of the rivers and springs, he regulates the relations between Man and the forest. The goblins or elves (called *mendez* in Nahuatl), the workers of these places, also live there.

The world is a fabric of both reciprocal and rapacious relations. Both domains are permanently tied together in day-to-day living; for example, when the men go out to harvest and cultivate corn, and, on special occasions, such as during therapeutic rituals. In this sense, illness (*kokolistli*) is the result not only of a biological but also a social maladjustment; it is the reflection of in-harmonious relations between humans and their surroundings.

\* Professor at the *Benemérita* Autonomous University of Puebla (BUAP) College of Social Anthropology, lauraromero1@hotmail.com  
Photos by Laura Romero.  
Opposite page: Traditional Nahua house.



Among the Nahua, illness is thought of as a function of its causes. This is not superstitious thinking attributable to an archaic society; on the contrary, the Nahua notion of illness is part of a specific way of being and looking at the world, which has incorporated the categories of allopathic medicine with which the inhabitants of the Sierra Negra co-exist.<sup>3</sup> So, traditional therapeutic practices include not only the use of herbs, copal, or the images of saints, but also aspirin, injections, vaccinations, etc. It all depends on the elements that have become imbalanced in the person who is ill.

In this sense, the overall symptoms are interpreted in light of the local etiology, and decoded by the ritual specialists, the *ixtlamatkeh*, men and women who know how to see, dream, and speak. In the eyes of the ritual specialist, the sick body becomes a text that must not only be read, but interpreted. Thus, when speaking of the importance of traditional healers, we must take into account three extremely significant aspects: first, the marginalization in which the indigenous peoples live; second, the lack of access to state health services; and third, the cultural aspect, which makes sense of these practices. That is, we can think that the presence of traditional healing is precisely the result of cultural diversity. However we must also recognize that traditional healers or doctors—as people tend to call them— fulfill a fundamental role as co-creators of the well-being of the inhabitants of the communities where they live.

#### THE HEALING RITUAL

The first step of a cure consists of determining the origin of the illness: “cleansing” the patient means rubbing his/her whole body with a pair of eggs, one at a time, and at the same time



Healers like Don Juan (here with his grandchildren) provide health care in communities where government services fall short.



The old tower.

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exhorting the Catholic divinities and the gods of the Earth to lend their aid to determine the reason for the illness. Once this has been done, the eggs are broken, and their contents poured into a glass half full of water. There, the healer can see—and this is where the importance of knowing how to see comes in— what or who has caused the illness. Depending on this diagnosis, the *ixtamatki* will report whether it is a disease that requires a doctor, thus referring to a condition that would not come under his/her area of competency (that of “natural” causes), and thus just a physical imbalance that the allopathic doctor could treat.

However, when it is a matter of envy, evil eye, or fright, things change. The first two are the result of conflictive social relations with relatives or neighbors that will be regulated using simple procedures like wearing red ribbons, sprinkling holy water, etc. In the case of a fright, the procedure will be to get in the middle of a negotiation with the so-called “Dueños” (masters), Tlalokan Teta and Tlalokan Tena (the Lord and Lady of Tlalokan), an esoteric name given to the Lord of the Mountain and the Siren in their ritual contexts. A fright is a very frequent illness among mountain inhabitants, and many other indigenous and peasant populations throughout the country. It basically implies the loss of one of the animate elements that make up the human being, the *tonal*.

The *tonal*, in contrast with the soul-heart (*toanima*) that all living beings have, is a quality exclusive to human beings. It is a subtle, ethereal, multiple, and relatively entity, since it leaves the body when it is in a horizontal position—at death, in dreams, during coitus, and during falls—or as the result of being very distressed, thus causing an sharp intake of breath and the exit of the *tonal* when the person exhales. At that moment, the *tonal*, which gives the human being his/her capacity for thinking and acting as such, is trapped and imprisoned by the entities that live in the non-human space. Recovering it implies an exchange, which

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Nahua woman and children.

must be achieved through the intermediation of the therapist, who, through his/her knowing how to dream and to speak, accomplishes the trade.

Given the continuity between dreaming and wakefulness, actions in one directly affect the other. Dreaming is not conceived of as a form of rest, but as a different way of being and being in the world, one in which the actions of the *tonal* are carried out. However, during his/her dreams and thanks to the gift (*iixtamalachilis*) the *ixtamatki* acts intentionally, not randomly like the rest of humans. His/her *tonal* goes to the places where during the diagnosis, he/she has been able to locate the lost entity; in addition, if necessary, he/she must fight against the negative forces that have taken control of this very valuable component of the human being.

Once the place the loss happened or the agent of the theft is located, the *ixtamatki* must speak for the patient, trying to convince those entities that they should exchange the *tonal* for copal, eggs, chickens, candles, and flowers, which all together make up a ritual offering called a *tlapatkayotl*, or “its substitute.” The masters will act in accordance with the *ixtamatki*’s capacity for speaking, which he/she has developed throughout childhood, while dreaming, or while accompanying his/her grandparents or parents, also healers, to do the work God had given them.

The *ixtamatki* are men or women who can do things and know things that others cannot and do not. As a result of the initiation to which they are subjected to be able to carry out therapeutic practices, they are recognized by the rest of the people in the world as a voice of authority. Through their knowledge, they call on and evoke the entities to the home of the patient where, in the presence of Catholic images, the therapeutic process is carried out, from the prognosis to the reintegration of the soul. However, we must be certain that the cultural differences in treating and understanding the disease are part of very different ways not only of seeing the world, but of being in it.



Offering to the Dead.

## THE PLACE OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE

In Mexico, more and more people are seeking the legalization of traditional medicine as an alternative; and for indigenous peoples, it is very often their only option. Indigenous medicine covers the spaces that the state has not been able to cover with health care, and, above all, it correlates to a way of conceiving of one's own body, surroundings, and the role the human being plays as one more subject in a world populated with intentions.

Traditional medicine is not only the result of a long historical and cultural process; it is also a real, tangible way of treating disease. It is so real that for many years, and even today, it is the only way that lives can be saved in the remote communities of Puebla's Sierra Negra. **MM**

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Sierra Negra region, located in the southeastern part of the state of Puebla, consists of nine municipalities: Ajalpan, Coxcatlán, Coyomeapan, Eloxochitlán, Nicolás Bravo, San Sebastián Tlacotepec, San Sebastián Zinacatepec, Vicente Guerrero, and Zoquitlán. The population is mainly made up of groups of Nahua, who share the territory along the border with Oaxaca with Mazatec communities. The ethnographical data presented in this article have been obtained mainly from the municipality of San Sebastián Tlacotepec beginning in 2002. In this case, interest centers on unraveling the cultural specificities of the therapeutic activities of the *ixtlamatkeh*, or "those who know," specialists in the rituals of the Nahua area of the Sierra Negra in the state of Puebla.

<sup>2</sup> The complex, institutionalized network of relationships of solidarity and loyalties, traditionally based on the links among godparents and parents, but extending much further than that. [Translator's Note.]

<sup>3</sup> Mexico owes its cultural wealth to what it has inherited from its first peoples. Today, of the 112 million inhabitants registered in the 2010 census, approximately 10 million are speakers of one of the 364 varieties of the more than 60 languages spoken in Mexico. However, this variety has fundamentally meant that it is practically impossible to give every Mexican —much less every indigenous person— decent health services. The Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Peoples (CDI) estimates that six out of every 10 indigenous persons live in a highly or very highly marginalized rural or urban region.

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