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Night Ceremonies and Chants

Recordings of María Sabina’s chants (Wasson and Wasson 1957a, Wasson et al. 1974) by American mycologist Gordon Wasson turned a humble but powerful woman into one of the most famous figures in modern Mexico, both within and outside of the country (Fig. 2.1; Estrada 1981). Nonetheless, despite the publication of the recordings along with full transcriptions, annotations, and translations of the recited texts in both Spanish and English (Wasson et al. 1974), the remarkable knowledge of María Sabina and many other chjota chjine from the region has not been given the attention that it deserves.

This chapter is an attempt to critically present and discuss original Mazatec chants that were recorded, transcribed, and translated by the author and Santiago Cortés Martínez, a huauteco with a long-lasting interest in the preservation and promotion of his native language, ceremonies, and traditional medicine. The chants provide a unique entry point into Mesoamerican healers’ images of themselves and their knowledge and powers. Colonial poems and chants are also critically presented alongside contemporary examples to understand the historical depth and trajectory of Indigenous way of constructing personhood and agency in a ritual context.

2.1. Colonial views on night ceremonies

Along with other deeply misguided and negative terms, such as “idol” (idolo), that have been used to describe sacred Mesoamerican images in colonial and modern scholarship, “drunkenness” ( borrachera) has been taken at face value when describing ceremonies, especially those performed at night, which are seemingly implied to be orgiastic, alcohol-fueled rituals. Such a misinterpretation is a direct result of the fact that every piece of information on the use of mind-altering, psychoactive substances in colonial sources was intended to demonize and extirpate their use. Treatises such as those by Ruiz de Alarcón and other friars compiled in the seventeenth century were veritable manuals for the identification of illicit Indigenous practices that involved substances such as ololiuhqui (datura seed), piciete (wild tobacco), and sacred mushrooms (teonanacatl; Andrews and Hassig 1984, Ponce et al. 1987).

The implications of such a prejudicial stance are seldom considered when relying on these sources for interpretation, perhaps due to common and long-lasting misconceptions of altered states in Western society and culture. Notably, Ginzburg (1983, 1991) unveiled how the witch-hunt craze...
of the early modern period persecuted deeply rooted agrarian cults in Europe. A person’s ability to transform into another being (human, animal, or supernatural) was deemed diabolical by the Church and led to the killing of hundreds of thousands of people, mostly women. Witches were accused of being willfully malevolent beings who vengefully caused sickness and death to others. It is not a coincidence that Inquisitorial practices in the Old World spread to the New World during the same period in the wake of the political subjugation of Indigenous peoples. After the so-called decline of magic and the rise of the modern state, which became the institution charged with controlling societal behavior, the condemnation of altered states passed from the realm of the diabolical to that of the insane (Foucault 2006). Even Freud’s theorization of the subconscious, which has been accepted by the medical and scientific establishment since the early twentieth century, elicits the idea of something subversive and threatening. To this day, substances that alter states of mind are mostly illegal and only used for recreational purposes.

In the case of Latin America, perhaps no scholar has more cogently expressed the deep and entrenched relationship between Western constructs and Indigenous American history than Michael Taussig (1986). In his work, the colonialist enterprise of the Peruvian Amazon Rubber Company in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries manifested the limits of European logos pushed to extreme and inhumane rationality in the name of capitalist extractivism, a situation that he described as “epistemic murk” (Taussig 1986, 121). The unspeakable torture and violence perpetrated against local Indigenous workers who were forced into the extraction of rubber was “a space of violence perpetrated against local Indigenous workers who were forced into the extraction of rubber” (Taussig 1986, 4, 127), from which the healing of these victims paradoxically began. Rituals with the yage, a sacred and powerful Amazonian plant, represent travel to the world of death and back, and they counter and heal the rationality of Western violence, which conceives of death as final and abhorrent—indeed, the physical and cultural destiny inflicted on Indigenous people in the Amazon rainforest. Where colonialist logic finds its most gruesome outcomes, a new type of understanding emerges.

In Mesoamerica, 1 Death is a date and a calendrical name associated with the sun, as seen in depictions of the trecena beginning with this day on page 66 of the Codex Borgia and the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 12v), among others. Moreover, 1 Death is the day sign of Tezcatlipoca (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4, ch. 9), the visionary god associated with night and darkness. The Nahua text and images that correspond to the day sign 1 Death (Fig. 2.2) in the Florentine Codex indicate sacrifice and cannibalism: “He will die sacrificed as a war captive. They will cook him in an olla and eat him” (Sahagún 1950–1982, bk. 4, ch. 9, 35). The upper image of the illustrations depicts a naked man seated on a rock, weeping with his head bowed. Then, the next image shows two people extracting the heart of a male victim stretched out on a sacrificial stone. Finally, the third image presents two people cooking and eating dismembered body parts. Cannibalism has been deconstructed and rejected as a largely early colonialist fabrication that began with the European encounter of the once infamous Caribs of the Antilles (Arens 1979, Reid 2009, 88–99; see also Barker et al. 1998, Isaac 2005, Wilkosz 2015, Declerq 2018, and Restall 2018). What is left of this image and the information provided by the Nahua author of the written text, once they are stripped of the barbaric distortion imposed by those who were in reality inflicting insufferable pain onto Indigenous people? Is death itself a journey from light to darkness and back?

A gloss in the Codex Telleriano-Remensis (f. 12v), penned next to the day sign 1 Death, reads,

Those who were born here would be magicians for they tried hard to transform themselves into the shapes of various animals as well as other shapes, as well as making it appear as if a man were separating into pieces, as if each leg and arm were detached. (Quiñones Keber 1995, 261)

According to Fagetti (2015, 153–155), modern shamans known as xicovame (fire serpents, sing. xicovatl) in the Nahua town of Tlacotepec, Puebla, experience the abandonment of their own body as literal dismemberment: flesh and bones are left visible on a table or a plate, while the person inhabits another physical state.
The man seated on a stone in the first image of Figure 2.2 is not pondering his somber destiny. Weeping is associated with vision, as discussed in Chapter 1. The naked man, devoted to Tezcatlipoca, is beginning his journey to reach the world of the ancestors and know his fate, which may mean death in battle or as a war captive, as also suggested in the above-quoted Nahua text from the Florentine Codex. As further discussed in Chapter 8, the intellectual missionary experiment that led to the creation of the Florentine Codex demonstrates the limits of the cultural encounter when it is framed by evangelical ideology. It was the missionaries’ intention to represent, with the authority of the victor, Mesoamerican culture at the moment of its declared death. As modern heirs of Sahagún’s ethnohistoric and encyclopedic method, Western scholars fall victim to the same mistake all too often.

Anthropologists have long turned their attention to shamanism and ecstatic techniques, building on the classic study by Romanian historian Mircea Eliade (1964). Furst (1972), Harner (1973), and Wasson (1980) are the most important contributions for the present study, which seeks to uncover the shamanic aspects of Mesoamerican being in the world, as expressed through visual and other artistic means (see also Harrison-Buck and Freidel 2021). Mazatec ceremonies and their language provide a key to the identification of elements in the pictographic and textual descriptions of Indigenous ceremonies, which speak to an enduring Mesoamerican paradigm of vision quests (or, as Santiago suggested, quests for an encounter) and spiritual transformations.

2.2. Mazatec night ceremonies

Night ceremonies have been referred to as veladas (vigils) since the work of Wasson (Wasson et al. 1974, IX), who also provided detailed descriptions of the general outlook and development of the performance he attended (Wasson and Wasson 1957b, 215–329, reprinted partially in Wasson and Wasson 2003). Velada is a translation of the Mazatec terms tsaka tio’nk or kjoyabinachon, both of which refer to the act of being awake at night. All ceremonies take place after dark, most often in the curandero’s house. Usually, people other than the curandero and the patient are in attendance, such as members of either family or close acquaintances.

The entire ritual, which lasts between two and five hours, entails different kinds of activities. Every time that I attended a velada, the curandero or curandera made a divinatory reading both before and after the ceremony using corn kernels, eggs, or candles, as explained in the previous chapter, which helped to clarify the prospect and outcome of my visit. At the same time, it seemed to me that these divinatory rituals, held in daylight, also served as a kind of introduction and closing for the nocturnal experience by connecting the dark time with the light of day. Praying with Catholic litanies, such as Avemaría and Padrenuestro, in either Spanish or Mazatec, accompanied the entirety of the night ceremony. Long periods of silence and casual chatting were also part of the communication established between participants. Plants, such as hoja de Pascua, as seen in the preceding chapter, and aguardiente (a distilled spirit) were frequently employed; they were mostly rubbed on the head, temples, and forearms of the patient, a procedure that was intended to “raise” (levantar in Spanish) them—that is, to infuse strength or calm. Copal smoke served the same function, and it was often blown on the participant’s face and body. While these aspects are almost universal, every curandero has their own style of conducting the ceremony and sings in remarkably different ways. In my experience, the most important factor that determined the outlook of a ceremony was the severity of the issue to be addressed, which could be physical, psychological, or social (e.g., interpersonal conflict). If the curandero themself had unresolved problems, these would also greatly interfere with and affect the quality or, more accurately, the intensity of the ceremony.

Although I attended five ceremonies, I was only able to record on three occasions because curanderos often do not want mechanical devices to disrupt the ceremony or their words to be recorded. During chanting, language could become rather obscure, but this was usually because recordings cannot reproduce the complexity of the lived experience and interactions shared by participants during the ceremony. Wasson’s 1974 publication is the only one that includes a complete tape recording, transcription, and translation (in both English and Spanish) of a ceremony conducted by María Sabina in 1958. By contrast, earlier published recordings (Wasson and Wasson 1957a) only contained excerpts from chants. For this reason, I believe that the latter publication only included partial transcriptions and translations, which could not be completed due to a lack of necessary context. In her later years in the 1970s, María Sabina was asked to perform a ceremony several times purely for the sake of being recorded, which she resented. She complained that the little mushrooms had lost their powers because of this. Even in earlier recordings from the 1950s, she agreed to the intrusion in the ceremony out of courtesy; however, in her own opinion, it came at a great cost (Estrada 1981, 90–92). The ceremony recorded in 1958 (Wasson et al. 1974) involved a young man called Perfeto José García who had fallen severely ill. It is important to mention Perfeto’s illness because, as seen in some of the following chants or excerpts, the quest, struggle, and longing for knowledge (to identify the origin and cause of the illness to cure it) is a central aspect of and indeed the driving force for the ceremony. Without it, it is unclear what the purpose of the ceremony would be.

2.2.1. Marina Mendoza

As can be gathered from the full transcription in Wasson et al. (1974), ceremonies are punctuated by long and strenuous requests to God and saints to elucidate why the patient is suffering and to plead for clarity on the causes and outcome of the illness. For example, the following excerpt represents an invocation performed by Marina Mendoza on my behalf in Boca del Río, a dependency...