The chant is the only instance during the entire ceremony where Marina openly states that she identifies with natural and supernatural beings, such as animal and saints. While she invoked God, saints, and other divine beings throughout the ceremony, as seen in the first prayer, it was only during this chant that she claimed otherworldly powers for herself. In other words, while she addressed supernatural beings during prayers and invocations, she only claimed to be or become them in a few minutes of chanting. In this respect, Marina’s chant is similar to María Sabina’s (Wasson et al. 1974, Wasson and Wasson 1957a).

Marina closed the sentences with the verb tso (says) or ti’tso (is saying), with the subject of the verb left implicit. Munn (1973, 89) remarked on this characteristic of Mazatec chanting, in which the speaker appears to quote someone else: “I am the strength of the world, I am the strength of the opossum, etc.” It appears that God or another religious authority is telling the women (i.e., bestowing upon them) the strength and powers of various animals. At the same time, the use of direct quotation makes the “I” in the embedded sentence a co-reference to the subject of the main clause “says/is saying,” whose subject is implicit. Not only is the “I” an indexical pronoun, but it also moves in a continuum from the relational stance of the present speaker to the fixed proposition expressed in the sentence: “The curandera is a spotted jaguar.” Thus, the speaker fluctuates between simply being themself to being the narrator of the event and seeing themselves from the outside looking in, finally returning to the initial quoted proposition: “I am the spotted jaguar.” This initial and final statement is not declarative but rather expresses an embodied experience: knowing is not believing but experiencing.

2.2.2. Baldomero Pineda and the chant of the grandparents

Chanting is a particularly lively aspect of Mazatec culture and not restricted to night ceremonies (Quintanar Miranda 2007, Faudree 2013). Baldomero Pineda (Fig. 2.4) from Santa Cruz de Juárez, a small dependency of Huautla, composes and performs his own songs for the yearly celebration of the Day of the Dead (Cortés Martínez and Frassani 2017). During one such occasion, when Santiago Cortés and I visited him in his shop in Santa Cruz, on November 2, 2014, he sang the following chant:
Night Ceremonies and Chants

Tsatsín k’aokoi jñan kjoa’ni tjima titsa’kjangi, tso
If you do not show where it is hidden, where it is covered, says

Tsatsín k’aokoi ji chjota nda xi tjen’koa jñan
If you do not show it, I come with my capable people

Ngo tjo si’xkoa si’ndenai jñani ngatinai ji
You will destroy me swiftly, wherever you are

Jonga faxoe, jonga fania jña, nga’i kjo’eñan
I bow with reverence and humility, now that we have come here

Ji kjoa koakonai án, nga’ya jına manai
You will show me where you keep me hidden

jñanin koa sai’li, tsoa kjoa’sai kjoanio’nân
Where you found it, there I will also find the strength

Jmeni jé xi ya án, nga koasin tjinamani’nain
What sin have I committed for which you are hiding from me?

Jmeni jé xichon nga koasin tjima titsakjiangili
What is the sin for which you keep it hidden and covered?

Tonga ndai án kotsen són, kotsenta’nân
But now I am the one who is looking carefully, the one who is searching

Niyaa ti’jñañ fân
There I am

Atsin ma’sinlee án nga k’oasin ya tinanio’nina
Don’t you feel for me, since you are keeping me hidden there?

Tonga tjen kaonan chjota titjona
I am coming with my important people

Ngo tjoas’koena, skoeya skoetañan
Swiftly he will rescue me, he will receive me

Tsimasianñan, likoi tibeñan
Poor me, I am not aware

Nga k’oasin tjima, tjitsakjiangili kjoa’ai tsen senixina án
Because you keep it hidden, you keep it covered, my spirit

Tsi’masîne, atsî’masianñan
Don’t you have any compassion, don’t you feel for me?

Ni’ya tsoatinianiole jña tinaî jî
You have sequestered me, you have hidden me there where you are

Jetsabe jña’nga jîninìoli
I have seen now where you have it hidden

Figure 2.4. Baldomero Pineda, Santa Cruz de Juárez. Photo by Javier García.

2.2.3. Leonardo Morales

Santiago Cortés Martínez and I participated in a ceremony with Leonardo Morales on July 29, 2014 in the locality of Barrio Mixteco in Huautla. The ceremony lasted around five hours and Leonardo not only prayed and sang several times but also whistled and spoke a non-existent language (glossolalia). Whistle speech is a well-known characteristic of Mazatec language, even in everyday use (Cowan 1948), and glossolalia has been recorded in María Sabina’s chants (Wasson et al. 1974, XI–XII). In the case of Leonardo’s, I had the impression that he was speaking Italian, given that the ceremony was directed at me and Italian is my native language.

However, Baldomero’s night chant differs from previously presented ones in that there is no claim of supernatural embodiment. While the speaker claims at some point to be able to thunder and rumble—thus equating himself to a storm, as is often the case with María Sabina—Baldomero does not mention any animal, natural phenomenon, or god. The singer becomes angry and at times confrontational, but the chant is clearly a quest—a persistent search for someone or something that is hidden. What is out of reach and invisible, purposefully covered, sequestered, or tied in chains, is unclear, but it is explicitly stated at some point that this is indeed the senixin, a word composed of the term sen that can mean “image,” such as one’s double, and nixin (day). Alan Suárez Ortiz suggested to me in a personal communication (2022) that senixin corresponds to the Nahua word tonalli, which refers to both the day (hence tonalpohualli, the calendar, as the “count of days”) and the character of a person (“spirit” closely related to the day of birth; Martínez González 2006). In this light, it becomes clearer that in the chant it sometimes appears as if the speaker is the one sequestered and hidden and other times it seems that something is hidden, sequestered, and looked for. I’sen also refers to a place of clarity and knowledge, as in the expression ndosen seen in Section 1.1, and wisdom is thus equated with self-knowledge. A longing for clarity and the relentless pursuit of enlightenment and knowledge on one’s destiny becomes the central issue in the following chant.

Baldomero’s song is unique in that it is not a night chant but rather a recollection of what his grandparents used to sing during the ceremonies. Baldomero himself has never taken mushrooms, which is not uncommon in the Mazateca despite their widespread consumption. Some people, including Baldomero, have never partaken in veladas, explaining that they have not received a calling to do so. Thus, the chant should be analyzed alongside the songs that Baldomero composes for the Day of the Dead as a tribute to the ancestors. At the same time, it clearly belongs and relates to the tradition of night chants, as several features indicate. In a manner akin to what was discussed before, the grandparents, who are the guardians of the world of the dead, and the singer, Baldomero himself, sometimes exchange roles. It is often unclear who is speaking, although it is explicitly stated at the beginning that “gold” (el oro) is speaking. Baldomero explained that gold is the same as cacao beans, one of the most common offerings used to communicate with the dead and the gods. Thus, in the chant, the gold-cacao is an animate intermediary that can speak and carry a message, but it is the chant itself that brings the ancestors’ message from the world of the dead to that of the living. As noted in the case of Marina, the often impersonal “says” (tso in Mazatec) conveys the idea of a message that stands on its own and depersonalized from whoever created or sent it in the first place.

K’oajotjin ma taón jmeli ‘an k’oetchyte, án
How little money do you want, I will pay, I

Tjen kaona chojta nda’ñ’an
I am coming with capable people

Tjen kaona án xì kjoa’axin
I am coming with the person who will unveil (clear) it

Jhanga tijna ta’nio’oa án
Where I am chained

Aní k’oaisín jnó tijta nai’ñan
Why do you keep me in chains?

Tonga nda’i jhán
But now I …

Koenå kjoa’xoc, kjoania jìña, ti kà kjoachan kjoa’ti, tso
You will show reverence and humility to me, let the anger go

Kao kjoanda, tso
With goodwill, says

Kjoaxoe fannia, tso
With reverence and submission, says

án kotsen són, kotsen’tañan so’nde xokji
I look carefully at this world

Tso xi tsaka tio’konni chjota chingana
So it says, when our ancestors kept the vigil

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Transcription and translation by Alessia Frassani and Santiago Cortés Martínez

Ngø’la’ni, koin … koin’cha
First, I will talk

K’ianga’ma nga’tjín’naa canto
It can be done, when we have some canto

K’ianga li’saa joxo’sin nga’tso’ba án
It is when … this is how I am going about