
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 themself 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 Nahuatl 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.

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.

Ngo’la’ni, koin … koin’chaa
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
Night Ceremonies and Chants

Ali’mé xi’tjinaa nga’tso’ba
I have no problem while I am going

To jngo sa’tse canto, nga’ma’na, nga’ba’jme
It is only a chant, because I can go

To’sa to jngo
It is only one

Un perdón de Dios, un perdón de Dios
God’s blessing, God’s blessing

Perdón del Cielo y perdón de aquí
Heaven’s blessing and earthly blessing

Como así se comunica que …
As it is communicated …

Está dando de todo nuestro Señor
Our Lord is giving us everything

Da gracias a Dios Padre Todopoderoso
Thanks to our Lord, almighty

No más tengo un canto
I only have a song

Jí ni’jñe, nga ji ni’jñe, nga jngo kjoanda xi’tsi
You, you are you, your blessing

Nga jí, jí, jí, nga ji, jí, jí, nga’i nga’i nga’i nga’sin tsó’ba nda’i
Because you are you, the reason why I am going around now

Nga ji bix’kiee, nga ji santa, nga, nga ji, nga ji, ngo kao jíin, kao ji nga nda’i
Because you read, you are saintly, you are unique, with you in this moment

Jí bix’kiee, nga ji santa, j’e … chakaonai’ña, nga i’tsó’ba, nga i’kjoe’e
You read, you are saintly, but talk to me, because I am wandering around here, I arrived here

Nga ngo kjoanda, ngo kjoanda, ngo kjoanda sije’lee nda’i
A blessing, a blessing, a blessing is what I am asking for at this moment

Ti’se’kao’na’iña, ti’se’kao’na’i ji
Help me, help me

Nga ji mamá, nga ji nga nda’i
Because you are the mother, because you are you in this moment

To jngo nga ji, to jngo nga ji, to jngo ni’nda’i
You are the only one, the only one, the only one in this moment

To jngo nga’jao, nga i’tsó’ba, nga i’ jo’nga, ngo kjoanda xi’tsi
It is only a hole, because I am wandering around here, because here is your blessing

Ngo kjoanda, nga kao nga ji nga kao josin tso’ba
A blessing, I am truly going around

I’so’nde xo’chón, i’so’nde xo’chón
On this world, on this world

Jini nda’i, ngoji’ni nda’i, nga jngo kjoanda
You are, you are now a blessing

Jini, ji, ngoji’ni ji, ji nga’nda’i
You are, because you, you are at this moment

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Transcription and translation by Santiago Cortés Martínez and Alessia Frassani

This chant is rather different from Marina’s and María Sabina’s and seems more akin to Baldomero’s. While both women claimed to have greater powers and become animals and supernatural beings, neither Baldomero nor Leonardo made such claims. The insistent and even threatening requests for clarity and knowledge in Baldomero’s chant are absent in Leonardo’s. He repeatedly and rather plainly states that he has a chant and is singing it. A term that Leonardo often employs is kjoanda, which can be translated as “blessing,” although the word has other meanings: offering, ceremony, grace, bounty, or something good in general. The same meaning applies to the word perdón (forgiveness) that Leonardo uses in the Spanish portion of the text. If so, the entire chant is about asking a supreme spiritual authority (the Virgin or the Father) for a blessing. Leonardo’s chant revolves around singing for its own sake without any explicit message or contents. The impersonality of the utterance, which was suggested in previous chants through the use of direct quotation with an implicit subject, becomes the central theme developed by Leonardo. Consequently, the text is full of deixis (i.e., terms that can only be understood in a relational context), such as “you,” “here,” and “at this moment,” which refer to a context without explicitly describing it. The place where Leonardo finds himself is only suggested but cannot be clearly identified. Although he directly addresses the Father and the Virgin, he may not be in their presence but rather longs for them. Leonardo never describes a situation that he sees or something that he hears.

Leonardo relied on the rhetorical and ontological trope of the mise en abyme to sing about himself singing. Caught in a labyrinth of his own construction, he disappeared into it. In a separate discussion, he compared chanting to the voice of a radio, which, unattached to its speaker, can rapidly move around and allow everyone to hear and enjoy it until the radio is turned off and the chant returns to where it originated (which I believe is God). In this light, we can also understand Leonardo’s glossolalia: words in a chant do not refer to anything but rather express the process of creating language itself (Munn 1973).

The narrator’s shifting and often ambiguous position in all the chants discussed underscores a specific feature.
of the language employed. As in daytime divination (e.g., the reading of maize), the wise person seeks signs and clues for a client, but only during night ceremonies do they embody the signs, the gods, to themselves become divine agents. Their ability to speak to the gods and invoke them is taken a step further, and the performer becomes the god and claims their powers. Such a transformation occurs when the curandero simultaneously describes a situation that they participate in and see themselves from the outside as if a spectator to the story. The ability to enter, inhabit, and then leave the attributes of a certain god or supernatural being increases their power. Although I was able to participate in a limited number of ceremonies and, in even fewer cases, to record and eventually study the texts, two aspects stood out in the chants. On the one hand, the chant is a search characterized by feelings of longing, solitude, hopelessness, desperation, and anger at times; on the other hand, there are moments of communion and even transformation into gods, whose powers and knowledge are claimed by the performer.

2.3. Colonial chanting

Some of the features highlighted in modern Mazatec chants can also be found in the few examples of colonial texts that reproduce chants and songs either in their entirety or in short excerpts. The performer’s consistent use of the first person and the conflation of several identities are frequently found in the so-called incantations collected in the early seventeenth century by Ruiz de Alarcón, as are exhortations from the singer, who sometimes angrily pled with the gods (Andrews and Hassig 1984). Ruiz de Alarcón gathered his material from several Nahua communities in the modern states of Morelos and Guerrero with the intention of creating a manual to extirpate enduring Mesoamerican ceremonial practices. The texts that he transcribed constitute an important historical source for the present study because the original context of their production and execution seems to be very similar to those of modern Mazatec divinatory and curing chants or prayers despite being considerably shorter, perhaps because they were collected as samples. In the incantation for fortune telling (Andrews and Hassig 1984, bk. 5, ch. 2), the text reads as follows:

Ca niman aman. Nohmatca nehhuatl.
It will indeed be I, immediately at this moment.

Nohxomoco. Nicipactonal. Nicmati huehue, nicmati ilamah
It is I in person. I am Ohxomoco. I am Cipactonal. I know Old Man, Old Woman.

Nimictlanmati, nitopamati
I am knowledgeable about Mictlan, I am knowledgeable about Topan.

Nohmatca nehhuatl. Nitlacamazqui. Ninahateuctli
It is I in person. I am the priest. I am the nahualli-lord.

(Andrews and Hassig 1984, 151)

The priest claims to be both Oxomoco and Cipactonal, the old diviner couple, and immediately follows by saying that they know them, seemingly because they have visited Mictlan and Topan, the otherworldly realms that surround the terrestrial plane. Thus, the “I” in the sentence shifts position and apparently indicates different identities and enunciators. As a result, the attributes of both the ancestral couple and the man-god (nahualli-lord) diviner are conflated, creating a complex image previously seen in the discussion of the primordial couple of the Codex Vienna in Section 1.2.

Around eighty years before Ruiz de Alarcón, Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún collected another important corpus of sacred texts (Sahagún et al. 1997, 128–129). They are referred to as cuicame (sing. cuicatl, song) and are formally different from Alarcón’s incantations. Despite the early date of Sahagún’s “sacred hymns,” as they have been called since Garibay (1958), their current form and context of production may have been influenced by early modern European poetry, as Tomlinson (2007, 9–27) suggested for another corpus of poetic texts, the Cantares mexicanos. In other words, it would appear that Sahagún’s cuicame were an early attempt to normalize Nahua ceremonial chants according to the canons of European poetry, as discussed in the Introduction. I do not think that it is coincidental that the songs were attached as an appendix to the second book of the Florentine Codex, which is dedicated to the veintena ceremonies, the most important ritual cycle of Nahua communities. In the same appendix, Sahagún discusses the temples, their rituals, and their gods. Thus, the songs are an aspect of the cult that is more directly related to activities within the temple, a divine manifestation akin to the image of the god itself. They are only indirectly related to the public aspects of the cult, which are presented in the main part of the second book, and are more accurately described as part of secluded activities within the temples, where the image of the god usually resides.

In Primeros Memoriales (Sahagún et al. 1997, paragraph 14, ff. 279r–280r), the chant performed during Atamalcualiztli (the Feast of the Water Tamales), a ritual that involved fasting with water and unseasoned tamales, begins with an invocation to the mother goddess Tlazolteotl before switching to a description of Tamoanchan, the paradise of abundance, where the corn god Centeotl is said to have been born. Then, the setting seemingly changes to a marketplace on the earthly realm (tlalpan), and the verse reads as follows:

Oytlatonazqui tlavizcallevaya
The sun has come forth, the morning has dawned

inan tlachichinaya nepapã quechol
And sundy red spoonbills sip nectar from flowers

xochitlacacax yãtala, yantata, ayyao, ayyave, tiltiuyao, ayyave oayyave