
SIERRA OTOMI:
PEOPLE OF THE MEXICAN
MOUNTAINS

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Religion has been a subject that has attracted the attention of many dedicated anthropologists. Religion calls for social scientific explanation. Why do people become involved with myths and unseen beings when their survival does not seem to depend on it? There is a puzzle here that attracts the scientist. Culture adapts groups to particular environments. Thus, there should be a relationship between religious belief and survival in a particular environment.

In 1962 I decided to shift my career from mathematics to anthropology. I was fed up with the destructive direction in which my job as an applied mathematician in missile development was taking me. I was fascinated by the way science might answer interesting questions, such as the one about religion. I jumped into anthropology, a place where, at least, I felt science would not incinerate the world, an unattractive future that my applied mathematics colleagues and I were being well paid to plan. Perhaps a science of human beings could help us understand why people and their cultures developed these destructive behaviors. I saw a new career ahead of me. This eventually led me to an involvement with the Sierra Otomí Indians of Mexico and their fascinating religious systems. I started studying the Sierra Otomí in 1967. I have made many field trips there since then. The last period of fieldwork, before writing this chapter, was in 1990.

A career as a cultural anthropologist usually begins with graduate study. After completing course work and, in my case, a summer of student fieldwork, the doctoral candidate prepares to work on his or her thesis. I had prepared myself to study a culture in Mexico, Central America, or the Caribbean, but I was not sure which culture to study. Doctoral students often go on to study practically the same culture that their thesis advisors have studied. This is not the best way to cover all the cultures of the world, because it concentrates an already short supply of cultural anthropologists in small areas. I liked the work that my graduate professors had done, but I wanted to cover additional anthropological territory, so I decided to go to Mexico City and talk to Mexican anthropologists there before picking a culture to investigate.

At the INAH (Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Historia) in Mexico I met the senior anthropologist, Roberto Weitlaner, who added to my knowledge of Mexican Indians. All the Mexican anthropologists were friendly and helpful to me. I realized that not enough work had been done with the cultures

of central Mexico and became curious about some of them. When Weitlaner told me about the Sierra Otomí, I became excited. Everyone was interested in the mysterious rituals in which they used paper figures to magically combat their enemies.¹ Up to that time most of what was known about the Sierra Otomí came from people who investigated the paper making. Their art of making paper out of the bark of trees was a pre-Columbian heritage that had been lost elsewhere. They kept on making the paper because their shamans needed it for the magical rituals.

ENTERING THE SIERRA

My wife Polly and I headed for the mountains where the Sierra Otomí lived. Exactly where they lived was not known. They were located to the northeast of Mexico City about halfway to the coastal city of Tampico. They were north of the Nahua Indians of the Northern Sierra de Puebla and south of the Nahua of the Southern Huasteca. The Sierra Otomí are not the only Otomí people. The word “sierra” distinguishes them from the other Otomí who live in the highlands to the west, north, and east of Mexico City. Most of the highland Otomí live in and around the Valley of Mezquital in Hidalgo. Later in 1990 with the aid of bilingual schoolteachers and several computers, I created a map showing precisely where the Sierra Otomí are. They occupy an area between 20° 7' to 20° 46' N. latitude and 97° 56' to 98° 27' W. longitude in the rugged eastern escarpment of the central Mexican plateau.

As we entered the mountains on a newly completed dirt road, we were impressed by the incredible scenery. We passed through alpine forests inhabited by a few shepherds. The forests were dark and misty. The tropical mountains soon opened up, revealing their splendor in glimpses through the trees. Then we found ourselves rolling along the side of a cliff. Streams gushed from the side, threatening to wash away the road. We could see thousands of feet down into sunny lit slopes with tiny pastures and fields and upward to towering forests. As we wound our way downward from 7,900 feet above sea level to around 5,300 feet, where crops and humans were more plentiful, we crossed an incredible divide called El Estribó (The Stirrup), a narrow

ridge wide enough for two cars that stretches between two great river valleys. To the right and east we could see for fifteen miles into the valley of the San Marcos river where the municipio (a territorial division of the state) of Pahuatlan del Valle was located. This valley is occupied by Nahua (modern Aztec) villages with the one exception of the Otomí village of San Pablito. San Pablito had been pointed out to us as the place where the bark paper was made. Yet it was on the edge of the real Otomí zone that lay to the north. The first valley of that homeland of more than forty thousand Sierra Otomí Indians opened up on the other side of El Estribó. The valley of the Río Chiquito was governed by the municipio of Tenango de Doria, where we were to spend the next year and a half getting to know the Otomí people.

The cultures of the Otomí, Nahua, Tepehua, and Totonac people of the eastern escarpment of Mexico are divided by valleys as well as by language. Although they do not speak of themselves in terms of the valleys, preferring to refer to themselves generally as people of the sierra, I discovered that language dialects and other cultural traits separate into valley systems. This discovery was made later after the maps were drawn. Anthropologists refer to this kind of conclusion as *etic*, which means that it results from observations made by anthropologists in scientific terms. The *etic* analysis revealed geographic cultural patterns that were not recognized in daily discourse by the people.

On the other hand, description and analysis can also be carried out with the concepts that one learns from the people. Such studies are called *emic*. One of my first tasks was to equip myself for *emic* studies by learning the Sierra Otomí language.

FIRST CONTACTS

Arriving out of the blue, with no introductions, in a faded Volkswagen Beetle, we sought a place to eat and sleep. We somehow reached a rustic eatery owned by the family of Idalid Ríos. Besides food, this kind family also offered us a room to rent next to a storehouse used by the *arrieros*, the mule drivers that carried on trade with more distant villages. The family has

remained our good friends through death and tribulation ever since.

The Ríos family spoke Spanish. They were mestizo people with a culture different from the Sierra Otomí Indians. The word mestizo is used to describe the rural people in Mexico whose ancestors may have been either European or Indian, but whose culture is completely non-Indian and developed around exploiting the commercial opportunities offered in the rural countryside. Mestizos are interested in trade and commercial farming. They maintain social and business contacts with other areas of the country, speak only Spanish, and educate their children for commercial careers. Don Lalo (Idalid) and his wife, Conchita, had been born in the highlands and had moved into the sierra to seek their fortunes as traders and farmers. Like many "frontier" areas of Mexico, this one was the home of Indians. So much the better for the new settlers. They could hire the Indians to work in their businesses and on their farms. In Mexico, Indians were never in the way. They were always seen as part of the landscape, as sources of labor. In rugged remote areas like Tenango, the Indians did not give up control of their land for a long time, but near the end of the last century lands around the capital town of the municipio were sold to mestizos. The capital town is also called Tenango de Doria. The economic wedge for the buyers was trade. Clever people were able to profit from trade between the sierra and the highlands and accumulate money to buy land. The availability of imported goods increased the common person's desire for money and his or her willingness to sell land and work for wages.

The late nineteenth century was a time during which state power was extended in this area to control independent minikingsdoms ruled by people called *jefes políticos* (political chiefs). As the consolidation of power was proceeding, the Revolution of 1910 threw the area back into political anarchy. The Indian villages were taken over by caciques, armed warlords who used military power to set themselves up as landlords. The common people became peons working the lands of these caciques. So, a series of second revolutions took place to liberate each village from the grip of such caciques. When we arrived in 1967 all the villages had been liberated.

With their trade contacts with the highlands the town mestizos had developed a political and economic power base that was linked with the state government of Hidalgo. With this sup-

port from the state the mestizos were able to dominate the municipal government. One of the oldest and most respected members of the community recounted the history of Tenango for my tape recorder. Surprising as it may seem, some of these powerful mestizo families of the town had once been Indians themselves. As the years went by, they identified with the elite classes of the highlands and lost their language and Indian customs. What invaded Tenango was not people as much as it was the institution of private property. Clever Indians fenced off land that was once communal and used it to farm for profit with the paid labor of their less astute neighbors. They acquired more land, engaged in trade and politics, and gradually became mestizos themselves, the rural upper class.

CULTURE SHOCK

A recent arrival like myself can make mistakes that sometimes are serious. For example, after we had been in Tenango just a few weeks, a policeman came to our door with a man from an outlying village to ask if we could take a wounded person to the hospital in Tulancingo. My first impulse was to rush to my car. I wanted to help as much as I could. Don Lalo stepped in and saved me. When he put his 38-super automatic in the glove compartment before we went down to the clinic where the wounded man was lying, I realized that something more than I comprehended was going on. The clinic nurses seemed very nonchalant about their patient. I found out that he had killed another person in an outlying hamlet. Family members of both the murdered man and the killer were present. The atmosphere was tense. It was not a situation in which one wanted to show favoritism to either side by offering free transportation. Don Lalo saved me from being involved by asking a high price for the use of the car. U.S. middle-class values did not apply to this situation. In this culture, rescuers were not impartial.

Many anthropologists and others suffer culture shock when arriving in a new culture. To live comfortably in a culture one has to behave predictably in the eyes of others and to be able to predict and understand their behavior. Otherwise, interaction with people becomes confused and stressful. The psychological

impact of culture shock also depends on the personality and psychological orientation of the new arrival. I experienced different kinds of culture shock than Polly. Being highly motivated by my ethnographic quests I was more willing to have open unstructured contact with people. Each unpredictable experience satisfied me that I was learning something new. My shock occurred when people became closed and uncommunicative or tried to manipulate me without giving me any information.

Polly, on the other hand, had a more normal desire for close, stable, and predictable contact with people. She sought more intimate relationships and ended up being much more manipulated than I. People would become her friends and then ask for things. This was frustrating to her at times. Her time was much more occupied by the problems that her new friends created for her. Much of her shock was with the physical surroundings. We lived in one-room houses like the Indians. She drew the line at food and insisted on having a well-stocked supply of canned and processed food that we drove in from the highlands every couple of weeks.

LANGUAGE STUDIES

To better understand Otomí thought and to develop emic tools for description, I undertook a study of the Otomí language. There were no textbooks or formal courses of study. It was considered a difficult language, and I met no anthropologists who had attempted it. My only sources of written information were Bible-translating missionaries, from whom I still could not get a well-organized grammar. At least they had worked out most of the phonetics. I had to learn the language on my own. I approached the problem in a systematic fashion by applying the understanding of linguistics I had acquired in my studies as a graduate student. This organized approach enabled me to learn the rules of grammar more quickly, and to compile notes that have been useful to linguists since.

The Sierra Otomí language creates nouns and verbs by applying prefixes and suffixes to root words (morphemes). There is no verb "to be" in the Otomí language. Otomí expresses the two meanings expressed by "to be" in Indo-European languages differently. "To be" can signify a state of something or

its location. To express equivalence in Otomí, one simply puts a verb prefix in front of a noun prefix. Otomí uses action verbs to indicate the location of something. In Otomí you can't say that something is somewhere without implying how it got there. You can say it was thrown away there, or that it is living there, or that it was put there. How it got there is important, because there are grammatical categories based on animistic beliefs;² Otomí regard some things as alive and others as inanimate. A living being must be "living there" and must have arrived under its, his, or her own power. Thus animate beings require a special "to be" location verb that implies that they are alive in that location and got there by themselves. Besides plants, animals, and humans, there are other living beings in the Otomí world. For example there is Sun, a powerful god. Not only must you use animate verbs with Sun, you must also use prefixes and terms indicating great respect, for Sun is not merely alive, he is the giver of life to other beings. Commenting on good sunny weather can be a problem for a novice speaker of the language.

My first language informant was an elderly, unemployed gentleman. Most anthropologists begin work with the more marginal souls of a culture, such as he. People felt that Victoriano was an excellent informant. He was out of work and would benefit from the modest sums that I paid him to sit with me and go through the rather tedious questions and answers that formal linguistic research requires.

A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

The municipio of Tenango de Doria had a population of 15,085 persons in 1990. Its territory was divided into the capital town of the same name with a population of 1,628; 4 large Indian villages ranging in population from 498 to 1,456; 25 hamlets (rancherías) ranging in size from 49 to 639 people; and 24 tiny ranchos ranging in size from 21 to 200 people. The villages and hamlets are more politically important than the ranchos because they have an appointed judge.

After learning how to speak Otomí while living in Tenango, I faced the fact that my early connection with the mestizos in the town and my living there were interfering with my ability to record and study the Indian culture. Therefore, we moved to a

nearby hamlet, Damo, to get a better picture of rural Indian life. It was the right decision. People who were living in the middle and toward the bottom of this stratified society began to accept us and give us the inside view of their culture. Polly concentrated on making friends and learning things that women talked about. I went further from our house in Damo to participate in many types of events and activities.

THE PEASANT ECONOMY

In Damo we learned the details of the daily life of the peasant farmer. The heart of survival for these people is farming. They live off the land by growing crops to feed their families. This way of life started gradually after agriculture was invented in central Mexico about six thousand years ago. As populations grew, people came to depend on their crops for food. Large populations developed and along with them a governing class. This combination of peasant farmers and a governing class makes up what anthropologists call a complex civilization. It is peasant agriculture in the countryside that sustains such cultures.

If the land of Tenango was left by itself, it would be a tropical cloud forest, a type of ecosystem similar to rainforest but found at the cooler, higher altitudes. However, centuries of human occupation have changed the ecology of the mountains. The lower valley regions are now spotted with fields and pastures. Cultivation is largely by hand. Mechanization is impossible on such land. Where the slopes are more gradual, ox-drawn wooden plows can be used to turn the soil before planting. Beyond that, there is no other work input to agriculture except the labor of the people themselves.

Pasture and farmland are owned privately and each peasant family with land tries to feed itself on what it owns. The biggest crop is maize, the hard corn that is the staple of the Indian diet. In the same hole with the maize seeds the peasant farmers also plant climbing beans, which are harvested with the maize in October. In separate rows they plant ground-growing beans that mature in late May. Two varieties of squash can be planted

along with the maize and beans. The mixed planting of these crops supports a nutrient-rich horticulture developed over the centuries. Such a field is called a milpa. The people plant milpas between the altitudes of 1,300 and 6,200 feet above sea level. Below 3,300 feet above sea level the milpa can produce a couple of maize crops each year. The lower altitudes are also suitable for growing sugarcane and coffee, important cash crops. The higher altitudes support pastures for raising livestock.

The productivity of the fields varies greatly. Where the land is less sloped, the fields catch runoff from the higher slopes and produce well almost every year. The fields on the higher slopes "tire" sooner and must be left fallow to replenish themselves. Trees and brush are cut and burned when a high-slope field is opened. Such a sequence of fallowing, cutting, burning, and planting is called slash-and-burn agriculture.

The schedule of planting and harvesting follows an annual pattern that varies with altitude. Around the town of Tenango, as the cold rains taper off in January, men begin to prepare the fields for planting. They dig up weeds and old cornstalks with a coa, a triangular spade with a curved handle. Swung sideways at the earth, the coa produces shallow cuts. The loosened weeds and stalks are pulled up, the soil is shaken off, and the refuse is thrown back on the cleared area to rot. The hillsides can be rocky, so the refuse is piled around the rocks to capture as much water and soil as possible. Men work in groups and chat while they work.

On flatter land an ox-drawn wooden plow tipped with steel may be used. The farmers make these plows. When I was riding to a distant town through the mountains one day, my companion Tancho stopped and stared at a tree for a long time. I asked him what he was doing, and he said that he saw a beautiful plow in the tree. He said that he would like to come back someday and cut that tree and make the plow appear. Tancho's father owned two plowing "oxen"—actually two cows putting in some extra time. Tancho himself owned a bull. Native bulls are typically tame and will work alongside cows to make up a team for plowing.

The final plowing makes the rows in which the maize seed is planted. The seed is kept in a pouch made from the skin of an armadillo and dropped in a hole made by a planting stick. The seed can be treated with pine resin to ward off birds and other pests. One can ask shamans to amplify the life force of the seeds

atop the sacred mountain, Cerro Brujo, where the seeds are blessed by the Sun and Grandfather Fire. The best seeds are selected from the harvest each year to be sown in the same location. Each microecological zone in the Sierra Otomí has its own seeds.

It is good just to go to the milpa to watch the plants grow, to breathe in the clean mountain air, and to bask in the sun while the plants come to life. It is a different life than working in the city, or struggling across the hot desert between the Rio Grande and San Antonio to make some dollars. "Who needs money?" said Ernesto, as we were watching the maize grow one day. "All they do with money is buy new clothes. I have clothes. They are rather old, but they cover my body, so why go to Mexico City to work for wages?" If you have land, you have some security. You can grow food for your family. But if you don't have enough land, not enough to get by when the harvest is poor, you are looking death in the face.

The majority of the work in milpa cultivation is preparing the soil. Later on you have to do some weeding, then heap the earth up around the base of each maize stalk. The planting is timed so that the young plants can catch the rain when it comes in June. The rains are heavy in August, so when the maize ripens the stalks are bent over to keep them from rotting from the moisture. The ripe maize is hard, but before it fully matures it can be picked, boiled, and eaten on the cob.

Mature maize is the staple food. It is scraped off the cob and ground on a grinding stone or metate. This laborious work is done by women. It is not surprising that the first machine a family buys is a crank maize grinder that breaks down the kernels and reduces the work of grinding on the stone metate. The grinding is made easier by soaking the maize overnight in warm lime water. When in Mexico, always eat maize tortillas instead of bread, because the lime in the soaking water provides most of the calcium in the diet.

When maize is harvested most of the ears are taken directly out of the husk while they are still on the stalks. A few may be twisted off the stalks with husk intact. These husks are later used to wrap tamales, the traditional Indian nutritious carry-out food taken on trips, usually pilgrimages to sacred shrines. Stalks are left to dry in the field, where they will be eaten by domestic cattle, or later cut and burned to fertilize the field. Harvesting is

done by the whole family. It is not hard work. The harvester wears a maize harvest basket, a *tancolote*, on his back and throws the ears over his shoulder into it.

Tenango has a weekly market held on Sunday. The market is a point of contact between Indians of the surrounding villages and between outsiders and Indians. Indian-to-Indian trading consists of exchanging money for some locally grown product such as onions, tomates (small green spicy tomatoes with a husk), avocados, barley, and so on. In the market one can find pottery from neighboring *municipios*, cloth from factories in the highlands, hats, ready-made clothes, and modern gadgets, including flashlights, batteries, padlocks, watches, tape players, ribbons, plastic toys, and so forth. Although based on small family-owned subsistence farms, the economy of the region is linked directly to a worldwide market economy.

THE PEASANT DILEMMA

How did the Sierra Otomí become peasants? The answer is that they have been this way for thousands of years. Much of the rest of the world has changed around them. Still a large proportion of the people inhabiting the globe are peasants like the Sierra Otomí. Agriculture provides a good, solid base for life. It captures the energy of the sun to produce food. It can be managed with just human and a bit of animal labor, and it keeps feeding people century after century. It does not need a complex technology or fossil fuels. It was a logical step for economic development to take after there were too many people to support by hunting or gathering.

The problem with subsistence agriculture among the Sierra Otomí, and elsewhere, is that it has been carried on too long and produced too many people for the land to support. Sierra Otomí population has been moving upward in recent years. There were fifty-four persons per square kilometer in 1970, when I completed my first field stay. This figure rose to seventy-two persons per square kilometer in 1990. The Sierra Otomí are suffering from the overpopulation that is common in many underdeveloped areas of the world. Their population density has

reached the maximum carrying capacity of their environment, which lies somewhere between fifty and one hundred persons per square kilometer. The exact figure is difficult to calculate because the productivity of the harvest varies from place to place and from year to year. But when populations reach these levels exact figures don't alter the picture. If it were not for opportunities for people to earn money in Mexico City and the United States, a bad harvest would bring widespread famine. This is a serious situation. Something has to be done to stabilize, and even reduce, peasant populations here and elsewhere before famine, disease, and revolution take care of the problem.³

The Sierra Otomí have been pulled into the worldwide economy through trade. Some are now laborers, who journey to places as far away as the United States to earn extra money, to survive, and to improve slightly their economic situation. There are special spots in the United States, such as the dairy farms southeast of Dallas, Texas, where illegal immigrants from the Sierra Otomí villages contribute to the North American economy. The NAFTA trade agreement approved in 1993 now pulls the economies of Mexico and the United States closer together. The food produced by the highly mechanized agriculture of the United States can now flow southward and compete with the peasant hand-grown food, but to eat it the peasants will have to work for someone for low wages. Peasant land will be taken by entrepreneurs who see everything in terms of its commercial use. The peasants will lose their one means of certain survival, the land. The effect on the Sierra Otomí and other Mexican peasants will certainly be great. The lives of the Sierra Otomí who have gone to work for wages near Mexico City are not enviable. As one passes dimly lit bars on darkened unpaved city streets, one hears angry, drunken words being spoken. Tales of broken families and human misery in this situation are not hard to find.

Indians see the government's failure to protect their land as betrayal. Land is their lifeline. If population growth was reversed, if enough land was distributed to the peasants, if domestic agriculture was protected, and if education was increased, the Indians of Mexico would evolve into a respectable rural farming class as peasants have done in Japan and France. However, the seeds of exploitation were planted deep by the Spanish Conquest. The Indian Zapatista uprising in Chiapas in 1994 was a dramatic peasant backlash against the tendency to

commercialize peasant lands. Among other things the Chiapas Indians reacted to the 1992 revision of Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution. This article had previously protected peasant lands and was changed to allow their further commercialization. Emilano Zapata, a leader of Indian peasants during the Mexican Revolution of 1910, fought for the principles of protection originally expressed in Article 27.

GETTING TO KNOW PEOPLE

Our house in Damo was really two houses. Attached to our one-room dwelling was another older building in which lived an older Otomí couple who were refugees from San Juan, a place deep in the sierra where the culture was even more traditional. Fausta and José were deeply spiritual persons. José had been cured by a shaman, who later married his daughter. They had lived with the shaman for six months while José was being cured. Many years later I studied the Otomí healing arts with this shaman, whom I call Don Antonio in the book I wrote about his work.⁴ Fausta, José, and their daughter Domitila added a new dimension to our Otomí experience.

Another of our new friends in Damo, Paula, was pregnant. She had the baby three months after we moved to our house. She had a rather long pregnancy that caused some anxiety. They thought it might be due to her eating peanuts and pineapples just after getting pregnant. Pregnant women have to be careful what they eat. Fausta noted that pregnant women lie buried with one eye below the earth and one eye above. This means symbolically that they are half dead already or in a delicate condition. There is a danger when their baby comes that they will go all the way under. Women who die in childbirth live with the Thunders because they do not die a good death.

The most educated mestizos seek pregnancy counseling in the highlands where they must also get a government sponsored lecture on birth control. The Indians cannot afford such modern facilities and continue with the traditional birth methods. However, their birthrate does not differ much from the mestizos'. They are helped by a midwife, whose duties include

cleaning the house and bathing the mother as well as assisting the birth. Women give birth in a kneeling position. The husband may help by putting his arms around the woman. The midwife receives the baby. It is slapped until it cries and is washed and bundled up. It is given to the mother, and is fed only a little cooking oil on the first day. On the second day it is given the breast. The afterbirth is buried unceremoniously away from the house where the dogs won't dig it up. The midwife returns three times, at three-day intervals, to bathe the woman in the sweat bath.

The sweat bath has medicinal properties as well as being the primary means of bathing at home. It is a small earth and stone house that is large enough only for one or two persons to sit or lie down in. There is a place where rocks can be heated by fire. Water is poured on the fire to make steam and the entrance is blocked by a robe. Inside, bathers scrub each other with the leafy branches of a mountain bush that makes a soapy lather. To bathe in the sweat bath brings health.

Paula's new baby cried excessively, and the family began to suspect the presence of a *pux'jwai*, a horrible night-flying blood-sucking witch. The family heard the flapping of large wings along with several shrill whistles. The *pux'jwai* takes the form of a large bird at night. It perches on the roof of the house and lowers a long tube through the roof to suck the blood of the child. It sucks from the place where the umbilical cord was recently cut, or sometimes from the toe, according to Fausta. Paula was staying up all night to protect her infant, who they thought sensed his impending doom. When they heard the flapping they immediately lit candles at the family altar to protect the house. Paula was feeling weak and sick, and the idea of dying in a hospital haunted her. Her father had died in a hospital. They were not able to reclaim the body and they feared that it was eaten by weird mestizo cannibals. Petty officials often demand payment to release a body from a morgue.

The danger posed by the *pux'jwai* was remedied by baptizing the child. Since my wife, Polly, had gotten to know the family well by this time, they asked us to be the godparents. We took the baby by ourselves to the church to have the priest perform the rite of baptism. When we returned to Paula's house we were greeted by the family in a new way, for we had become their *compadres*, ritual co-parents. We sat down to a ritual meal.

COMPADRAZGO

Compadrazgo, the social institution of ritual co-parenthood, extends the principles of family membership to persons who are not related. Compadres formed by baptism are important allies. Forming compadres by baptism involves the following. First, the parents of the child make a respectful visit to the prospective godparents to ask this favor. The prospective godmother should then visit the parents' house to formally accept or refuse the offer. If they accept, the godparents buy clothes for the child and take it to the church for a private ritual of baptism. The parents may invite the godparents for a meal after they return from church. After that, they couples greet each other in a special way. Compadres will use the phrase, "Tege tho Pü ran zaki?" which means, "How fares your life force?" Zaki, life force, is an intimate and important part of the individual that should not be mentioned casually.

The godparents may pay for a mass to be said for the mother after she is recovered from the birth ordeal. She will be blessed by the priest in the church. Afterwards they may have a feast at their house. Every year in November after Todos Santos, the Days of the Dead, the parents will make gifts of bread to the godparents and have a party there. As it sometimes happens, if the child dies before it reaches sexual maturity, the godparents have the duty of burying the child. This includes tying the hands of the child with a ribbon and placing a flower on its chest. Everyone feigns happiness because the child is an *angelito*, little angel, whose soul goes directly to heaven. The musicians hired by the godparents play the music of the little angels, a lively and happy sort of sacred music. If the child dies after sexual maturity, it is no longer an *angelito* but a *difunto*, a deceased person, who is buried by kin.

The gestures used by compadres when they meet are sensitive and elaborate. Sierra Otomí social contacts are very polite and formal in comparison with those of the mestizos. When greeting, Sierra Otomí compadres bow slightly and reach forward to touch the left side of the chest under the arm of the other person with the fingers of the right hand. Then they touch the palms of the right hands with the fingers. Finally the god-

parent extends the right hand to be touched by the lips of the parent, and the parent does the same to the godparent.

KINSHIP

Kin terms vary with culture. For example, there are two Sierra Otomí words for brother and two for sister. A man refers to his sister by a different term than a woman uses to refer to her sister. Also the terms for siblings are extended to cousins. So a man calls his sisters and his female cousins 'ku and they call him ida. However, a woman calls her sisters and female cousins juhwe, and a man calls his brothers and male cousins 'yohø. These linguistic features have evolved from long periods of family cooperation in the cultivation of the subsistence crops. Male cousins often work together jointly to cultivate inherited land and female cousins cooperate in preparing food for family sponsored feasts.

The Sierra Otomí allow the inheritance of land by both men and women, but usually favor those who work the land, the men. As men get older they consider how to divide their land. Sons who are able to work the land receive equal shares. They usually receive the land before the father's death so that they can farm it. By this time the father may be too old to do the heavy labor. Daughters will receive land if they marry a man who has no land to support their children. The principles of land inheritance are precapitalistic. Land is not treated as a commodity. It is the source of survival and should go to the person who uses it to maintain a family.

Although people call on cousins to help them with such things as the harvest, each nuclear family (consisting of parents and children) occupies a separate house. The houses are built by the people themselves following traditional designs. There are four designs: a frame house with vertical board walls, a log-cabin design with heavy horizontal boards, a stone house, and a "modern" house built of concrete bricks. The typical house has only one room. Old houses have wooden shingles on the roofs. These were replaced by manufactured corrugated asphalt sheets, and later by corrugated metal sheets. The roofs are constructed with inclined gables and have an opening near the top

of the gable at each end to let smoke out. The packed dirt floors are being replaced in some houses with concrete. The house that Polly and I rented in Damo was one of the few at that time that had a concrete floor. It had only one room, but was easier to keep clean because of the concrete floor. It also had a corrugated metal roof to which I could see little advantage beyond durability. It made much noise when it rained. The owner had built the house on his inherited family land with money he earned as an engineering assistant in Mexico City. He moved his family to humble rented accommodations in Mexico City, but typically kept his status as a peasant in the village by hiring local men to plant the milpas around the house.

Cooking is done by women over a wood fire. The fire may be built between three hearthstones on the floor, or on a raised table-level hearth. Wood is the preferred fuel because it is free, placing ecological pressure on the surrounding forests to supply it. Small trees may be taken freely by any person for cooking as long as large lumber trees are not cut. Although people sometimes have to travel three or four kilometers to reach the fuel supply, wood remains the primary fuel.

ACCUSATIONS OF BEING AN EVANGELIST

Being an outsider and a North American, I was the object of suspicion when I first arrived. I presented letters of introduction from my Mexican colleagues. Still many people believed I was a Protestant missionary. The only North Americans that had ever come to visit the Sierra Otomí were Evangelical missionaries. A group called the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) claimed that their purpose in coming to the municipio was to study the Indian language. However, their real goal was to translate the Bible into the native tongues. A SIL worker had been studying the language and encouraging a change to Protestantism in the village of San Nicolás for almost a decade before I arrived. There was much opposition to his work. Violence had erupted over religious issues. Therefore it was necessary for me to protest that I was not a missionary, partly for my own safety. I had to do as

much as I could to show that I respected the traditional beliefs and religious customs. In this way, I was pushed into studying the native religion faster than I might have otherwise.

The change to Protestantism in San Nicolás had not occurred solely because of the presence of a SIL missionary. In fact, it probably would have occurred without his presence. Stresses were developing in the native religion. It was failing to deal with demographic and economic changes. Greater prosperity and modern medicine in the post-World War II era had created a demographic growth pattern in which there were fewer young people to serve in the ritual offices of the traditional religion. The same processes were at work in the three other large Indian villages of the municipio. The result in 1968 was religious conflict between the traditionalists and Evangelists.

The etic dimensions of the religious conflict were not apparent to the people involved. As the missionaries saw it, places like San Nicolás harbored especially suffering souls more desperate to receive the word of God than people in other places. Before the SIL missionary arrived, a local individual had already convinced himself that the Bible contained the answers to their problems. More than any other new religion, Evangelical Protestantism had prepared itself as a sophisticated answer to problems within the native religion. The foreign missionaries were tools in the hands of local people bent on changing their own culture.

VISUAL IMAGERY AND LIFE FORCE

Typical Mesoamerican natives, the Sierra Otomí use visual symbolism in their ritual practices. Dances depict myth, and images depict superhuman beings. The images symbolize the essential living reality of beings, the *zaki*, the life force. Without *zaki* the world would be frozen in a motionless twilight.

The Sierra Otomí worship one category of superhuman beings called *Zidahmu*. *Zidahmu* translates most accurately as "respected great lord" rather than "god." It is the custom to refer to the images as if they were alive, although everyone can see that they are just images. There are two types of *zidahmu*: (1) Catholic saints introduced long ago by Spanish friars, and (2) Otomí superhuman lords called *antiguas*. The people say you

buy a Catholic image in a store, but that an *antigua* comes of its own accord because it wants to be with you. The *antiguas* “arrive” by being dug up in the *milpa*, by being found by streams, or by pure magic, which is hard to explain. Some are pre-Columbian images, and others are of more recent manufacture. *Antiguas* are good to their owners and receive periodic offerings. The offerings of special flower decorations and food are presented in a ceremony called the *costumbre*. People dance in front of the altar and with the images themselves. The sacred music, flowers, incense, and candles set a happy and beautiful scene. Baskets of cut paper figures made by shamans adorn the altar. One senses the presence of the life forces, of the *antiguas*, principal gods, guardian spirits, saints, and humans. In the morning the *costumbre* ends with a meal made up mostly of the altar offerings reheated in the kitchen.

The owners of images of *antiguas* or Catholic saints may place one or more in a small building called a *nguja* (god house). Such a building is referred to as an oratory, or *oratorio*, in the anthropological literature. When a family builds an oratory the cult of the image goes public. Supporters contribute to the *costumbres*. The important public *costumbres* near Tenango focus on Catholic images, although family *antiguas* may be hiding under embroidered cloths beside their more proper Catholic counterparts. The owner selects godparents for the image, much like he would for a precious child. The godfather develops a following, too, and both groups unite to hold an annual *fiesta* at the oratory. The godfather and his supporters bring candles, rockets,⁵ baskets of flower offerings, rum, cookies, and food. The owner provides more food. The all-night *costumbre*, drawing sometimes more than a hundred people, ends with a meal in the morning. During the ceremony the supporters of the godparents refer to the supporters of the owner as *compadres*. Thus, the bonds of familial co-parenthood are extended to whole groups and tend to unite the community.

Shamans are native healers who solve domestic conflicts, cure disease, and help the farmer bring the life forces back into his *milpa*.⁶ They also act as ritual advisors at the *costumbres* of the *antiguas*. Although shamans are also peasants, their shamanic work can keep them busy for weeks at a time. They may hire people or ask a kinsperson to do their farm work. Women as well as men can be shamans. Shamans work primarily with the *zaki* of plant, animal, human, and superhuman

beings. Each shaman has his or her particular style and particular specialties. In their rituals, shamans represent the zaki with figures cut out of paper.

Shamans are called upon when a family is particularly troubled by disease or psychological distress. Shamans make more house calls than Western doctors, but normally receive their patients in their home oratories first. There they give "consultations" that bring patient, shaman, and superhuman beings into a therapeutic alliance. They may visit a house to clean it of evil airs, wandering troubled souls. They may counteract evil sorcery with rituals. They may suck evil magic out of the body of the sufferer. Above all, shamans are warriors on the side of the patient, attacking the evil besetting him be it disease or envious neighbors.

THE IMAGES GO PUBLIC

The Church in Tenango has a storeroom full of Catholic images. Over the years, images have been brought to it from the local oratories to add prestige and political influence to the owners. Whereas the cults of most of these images have faded with time, a number have remained to become the focus of rituals involving the whole town. The town church contained six major and two minor images in 1990. The number changes over the years and enthusiasm for the rituals waxes and wanes.

The Tenango mayordomías are religious groups that hold public celebrations for the town saints. They rely partly on the contributions of their members to maintain their fiestas; however, there is always a person, the mayordomo, who assumes the major financial burden of the fiesta. The major mayordomías celebrate the six primary saints of the parochial church, and are ritually interrelated. Two minor mayordomías are more like independent oratory groups; however, unlike the oratory groups, their images do not reside permanently in oratories, and the members contribute more significantly to the costs of the fiesta than the members of the oratory groups. All the images visit the oratories during the major festival. These oratories are not permanent locations, but are buildings in town loaned by supporters to the mayordomo for the purpose of celebrating the festivals.

As the images go public, great prestige adheres to those who sponsor the festivals. The mayordomos spend money on the festivals and reap the prestige and fame that goes with it. A mayordomo serves as long as he is able and then passes the office on to another who has the eagerness to do his part and reap his rewards of prestige.

A REGIONAL VIEW OF PUBLIC RELIGION

Life in Damo did not give a complete picture of the Indian culture. Other things were happening in the Indian villages, so I decided to move to a village called Santa Mónica. It fitted closely Eric Wolf's concept of the "closed corporate peasant community."⁷ According to the mestizos of Tenango, Santa Mónica was a dangerous place with uncivilized Indians where the mestizos failed to walk. Mestizo men would often take their pistols with them when they visited Santa Mónica. The men of Santa Mónica lived up to this reputation when they visited Tenango. They drank heavily and were boisterous and obnoxious. Having gotten to know the people of Damo, and finding out that there was another side to Indian lives and culture, I was a bit doubtful about the warnings from my mestizo friends. It didn't help to have Don Lalo point out the place on the trail where they had assassinated the local cacique. Later, waking in the morning from a comfortable sleep in my little house in Santa Mónica, hearing the birds chirp and the sounds of tortillas being patted, and seeing the smoke rising lazily from the morning cooking fires in the still air, I couldn't imagine a more peaceful village. There was a great deal of posturing between the people of Tenango and Santa Mónica. Santa Mónica had kept its closed secret of being a peaceful village of humble, hardworking peasant souls, who were not ready for any outsiders to buy land or start businesses there.

I found that the power and prestige gained from participation in a ritual system gained new heights in Santa Mónica. There the entire political control of the village was established by their religious rituals. Anthropologists call this a civil-religious hierarchy or cargo system. There were small private orato-

ries in the village, but the five major saints lived in a chapel called the danguja. There was a church, probably built in the early sixteenth century by Augustinian friars, but it wasn't used much.

Each village saint had a godfather and five mayordomos. Men gained great prestige by serving in five or six of these offices over a lifetime. One mayordomo for each image was designated as the "big" mayordomo (tabëtoni), and the others were "lesser" mayordomos (teda bëtoni). The offices were called cargos, burdens. The expenses were great, and not every family could afford it, but if you eventually completed the highest religious cargo, that of godfather, you would become an anciano (elder) of the village. The elders had all the political power. They appointed all the officials of the village government, they decided difficult cases that the judge could not handle, and they named the people who would become mayordomos and godfathers in the coming year. The ancianos were the ultimate power holders in the town.

The political potential of public religious activity was great. The people of Santa Mónica had turned to this system after they assassinated the cacique. Compared to the dictatorship of the cacique, it was highly democratic. Every man could participate according to his ability to serve the community by serving the saints. Those who redistributed the most to the community received the most power and influence. However, in Tenango where the political control was in the hands of the mestizos, mayordomos were allowed only prestige but not the right to govern.

The public religion deals with the relationship of groups to the superhuman world and, consequently, with the structure of social groups and the political relationships within and between them. All the public religious groups of the Sierra Otomí can be subsumed under one type, the religious corporate group. This type is based on Max Weber's concept of corporate group. Weber writes:

A social relationship which is either closed or limits the admission of outsiders by rules, will be called a 'corporate group' (Verband) so far as its order is enforced by the action of specific individuals whose regular function this is, of a chief or 'head' (Leiter) and usually also an administrative staff. These functionaries will normally also have representative authority.⁸

I define a “religious corporate group” as a corporate group represented by its officers in social relations with superhuman beings and other political groups. The oratory groups, the mayordomías, and the civil-religious hierarchies of the Sierra Otomí are all religious corporate groups. They are all one social structural type.⁹

THE COLLAPSE OF THE CARGO SYSTEM

There was trouble in this holy democracy of Santa Mónica. Patricio, the judge of the village, confided to me his misgivings about the cargo system. He said that he had to sell the land to meet his cargo obligations. For a peasant to sell land, albeit to other villagers, is a serious step, for land is life. Without land the family is pushed toward starvation, or at least, toward dependence on others for wage work.

Strains were beginning to appear in the cargo system in 1969. A recently completed road to the highlands ran along the mountainside above the village. A man in good shape could climb to it in less than an hour and in another five hours, with luck, could be in Mexico City. Young men had gone there to work and had come back with the idea that wealth ought to be spent on improving one’s house rather than on the fiestas. Also, demographic shifts brought about by the same prosperity that had opened the jobs near Mexico City had decreased the ratio of younger men to older men. These demographic patterns were not obvious. I had to collect volumes of raw census data and feed it to mathematical models on my computer back at the university in order to discern what was happening in an etic sense. In Santa Mónica people told me that the elders could not find young men to fill the lower cargos. I first assumed that this was because the young men did not want to redistribute their wealth. Patricio’s son, who had worked in Mexico City, was constantly telling us how foolish it was to participate in the cargo system. I did not realize until later, after Santa Mónica had abandoned its cargo system and after I had gathered and processed all the census data, that there was a real lack of young men in relation to the number of ancianos calling on their ser-

vices. The ancianos themselves were unaware of these complex demographic processes, too.

The ancianos exacerbated the problems by using their power to put men who did not want to accept cargos in jail. This oppression coupled with the fact that there were too few young men to meet the demand led to more and more enthusiasm for Evangelical Protestantism. The Pentacostal Protestants argued from the Bible that the cargo system was based on sinful idolatry. They banded together, built their own church, and defied the power of the ancianos. Eventually the ancianos succumbed to this revolt. The last mayordomo served in 1977.

The Pentecostal church offered a theology that was adapted to undermining cargo systems. No doubt people were truly saved by Jesus. Life under these circumstances was not easy. The one theological argument that was always presented above all others was that religious belief and ritual should come from reading the bible, not from listening to the ancianos. The authority of the Bible was increased by the fact that the Catholic church and North Americans also recognized it.

The Catholic church also entered Santa Mónica. It also rejected the cargo system. A charismatic Catholic missionary, Madre Gloria, came to the village in 1978, went from house to house with an image, and encouraged people to pray. Thus a new group of Catholics was formed. This new group has a good opportunity to succeed, because it bridges the gap between the older tradition and the Protestants. It allows public fiestas, now paid by a collection from all the Catholic families. It has introduced a new Christmas ritual, the *posadas*, in which some Pentecostals participate. The fact that the Pentecostals have allowed *piñatas*, decorated jars of cookies and candy, in their church has caused a more radical fundamentalist Protestant group, the *Iglesia de Dios del Septimo Día*, to break away from them amid accusations of Biblical impurity. This small group of eight families says that God does not want people to decorate their temples.

THE RELIGIOUS PROCESS

Based on the theories I knew, I would not have been able to predict the type of religious change in the municipio of Tenango de Doria. However, if I had been forced to guess, I probably would have predicted the opposite of what happened. In the municipal capital where there had been an obvious loss of political power

by the religious corporate groups, I would have predicted a further diminution of the *mayordomías* and a rejection of traditional beliefs. This prediction would have been partly based on the idea that there are two cultural poles—the urban and the folk. As a village moves toward the modern urban commercial culture, the folk ways will disappear.¹⁰ What happened was the opposite. Thirty years after I first looked in on the Sierra Otomí, traditional forms were strongly adhered to where the market economy influences were the strongest, in Tenango. In Tenango and Damo, where people had been visiting Mexico City and working for wages much longer, people revived the pilgrimages to the mountaintop. A new pagan *mayordomía* was even created to sponsor these rituals. Thus one must conclude that the way in which contact with market-economy forces affects a community depends on the culture of the community. The cargo system in the more “traditional” village was particularly vulnerable, whereas the Tenango *mayordomías* were not.

In the village of Santa Mónica, I might have predicted a gradual diminution of cargo service; however I would have expected some sort of fiesta cycle to continue. Instead there was an almost complete abandonment of the traditional public religion. The power of the *ancianos* evaporated. The *danguja* was closed and the images were piled without respect in a dusty storeroom of the church. People stopped going to shamans. They did not go to the mountaintop to have their seeds blessed. Venerable, moss-covered stone oratories were allowed to fall into ruin. With the exception of two holdout private oratories, all traditional rituals in the village ceased.

Religious change does not follow the same path as technological change. New religious ideas do not infuse slowly into a culture as a new tool might come to be used. They often enter the scene quickly, according to the emotional needs of people. New religious ideas may be profoundly affected by economics, demography, ecology, and other material factors. Religious ideas respond to the human beings that create them. These human beings interpret their experience with the material world in symbolic forms that cohere at the social level in new religious concepts. Thus religion interprets human daily experience and gives meaning not to contact with the material world but to the feelings encountered while making that contact.

NOTES

1. For a compendium of paper figures cut by Otomí and Nahua shamans of the Sierra and southern Huasteca, see Alan Sandstrom and Pamela Sandstrom, *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986).
2. The concept of animism was defined in the last century by Edward Tylor, one of the few anthropologists of that time who visited the people about whom he wrote. Animism is a belief that spirits or souls inhabit all things that move, including people, plants, and animals, and these spirits explain the life and movement that the things exhibit.
3. For a global view of the impending crisis produced by overpopulation, see Robert D. Kaplan, "The Coming Anarchy," *The Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994).
4. James W. Dow, *The Shaman's Touch: Otomí Indian Symbolic Healing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986).
5. Rockets are widely used in religious rituals throughout Mexico. One can think of them as large public ritual candles. They rise into the air, explode, and thus punctuate important points in a ritual.
6. The work of Sierra Otomí shamans is described in James W. Dow, *The Shaman's Touch: Otomí Indian Symbolic Healing* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986).
7. Eric R. Wolf, "Closed Corporate Peasant Communities in Mesoamerica and Java," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 13 (1957): 1–18.
8. Max Weber's, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), pp. 145–146.
9. The concept of religious corporate group is described in greater length in James W. Dow, *Santos y Supervivencias: Funciones de la Religión en una Comunidad Otomí, México* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional Indigenista y Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1974).
10. The original anthropological idea of the folk-urban continuum can be found in Robert Redfield, *The Folk Culture of Yucatan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1941). There are many theories of what happens to cargo systems when people come into contact with the market economy. See the introduction in

Lynn Stephen and James Dow, *Class, Politics, and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America* (Washington, D.C.: American Anthropological Association, 1990), pp. 10–13, for a brief discussion of them.

SUGGESTED READINGS

- Dow, James W. *The Otomí of the Northern Sierra de Puebla, Mexico: An Ethnographic Outline*. Monograph series no. 12. East Lansing: Michigan State University, Latin American Studies Center, 1975. This is a more formal and detailed ethnographic description of Sierra Otomí culture.
- _____. "Religion in the Organization of a Mexican Peasant Economy," in R. Halperin and J. Dow, eds., *Peasant Livelihood*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1977. This chapter explains how the cargo system contributes to the peasant economy.
- _____. "Symbols, Soul, and Magical Healing among the Otomí Indians." *Journal of Latin American Lore* 10 (1984): 3–21. This article discusses the Sierra Otomí belief in zaki, the animating life force and its importance in healing.
- Dow, James W. *The Shaman's Touch: Otomí Indian Symbolic Healing*. Utah: University of Utah Press, 1986. This book is half written by my shaman teacher and half by myself. It explains how Sierra Otomí shamans heal and control the evil forces that bring trouble into the world.
- _____. "Sierra Otomí Carnival Dances," in Janet Brody Esser, ed., *Behind the Mask in Mexico*. Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1988. The article in this book beautifully illustrates the wild masked dances held during Carnival time among the Sierra Otomí. It is an art book showing and explaining the masked dances of Mexico.
- Sandstrom, Alan, and Pamela Sandstrom. *Traditional Papermaking and Paper Cult Figures of Mexico*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986. This book catalogs and illustrates the paper figures used by the shamans in the Eastern Sierra of Hidalgo and the Southern Huasteca of Mexico. Besides the Sierra Otomí, the Nahua, Totonac, and Tepehua shamans also

30 PORTRAITS OF CULTURE

use paper figures.

Portraits TOC

The Otomi (/ˈoʊˈtɒmi/; Spanish: Otomí [otoˈmi]) are an indigenous people of Mexico inhabiting the central Mexican Plateau (Altiplano) region. The two most populous groups are: Highland (or Sierra) Otomí, living in the mountains of La Huasteca. They usually self-identify as Ā'uhu or Ā'uhmu, depending on the dialect they speak. Mezquital Otomí, living in the Mezquital Valley in the eastern part of the state of Hidalgo, and in the state of Querétaro. They self-identify as Hā'ā'hā'u ([É°É²É¹ìfÉ°É²Á©]).