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Tzö dapö: Using “Saint Rose” In the Otomí Tepehua Mountains

Mexico is a highly evocative country because of its many characteristics; one of these is the religious life of its first peoples. Rituals play a huge part in this, marking sacred time and differentiating it from the profane. Their ancestral legacy, memory, and the related beliefs and practices, together with their relationship with nature, have defined them as cultures imbued with mysticism.

We should remember that these peoples have knowledge of their surroundings that dates from time immemorial. This allows them to interact with nature and the divine, benevolent beings they coexist with. Therefore, as wise people, as ritual specialists, based on their comprehension of that world and the dreams where these beings and forces reside, they deal with them seeking to maintain equilibrium and recover social well-being.

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Illustration by Fernando Ibarra, *Rostro de la Santa Rosa*.

The Sacred Dimension of Plants

Mexico has extremely varied natural areas and ecosystems, where a great diversity of medicinal, powerful, and

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entheogenic plants grow (entheogenic substances are those that grow naturally or are prepared using them that have psychotropic properties). They are usually known and handled by both men and women specialists in traditional medicine, who use them, and at times ingest them, in a sacred time and place with specific aims.

Many rites and ceremonies are linked to all these plants and entheogens; for these peoples, they are the highest representation of the divine. For this reason, from this perspective they are related to their natural landscape and the places they inhabit, since they are their roots and essence. That is why this country is considered magical.

I should mention that in the early twenty-first century, despite this tradition, the psychoactive plant called cannabis has become extremely polemical, both in the legal sphere regarding its cultivation and personal and medicinal use, and regarding its industrial uses. However, at the same time, and rather contrary to the debate, in the Otomí culture of eastern Hidalgo state, cannabis is sometimes ingested and manifests itself not only in the bodies of the ritual specialists, but also in the world of Otomí dreams, where it takes on the physical attributes of a little girl, a woman, or an old woman.

Divine Image of Cannabis

The term *tzö dapö* (“bad weed”) exists in this world view; it defines cannabis in its initial, wild state. However, when it is conceived as one of the most important deities, it is called “Saint Rose.” The plant moves through several stages before becoming holy, and along that road, it is represented in different ways.

The specialists carry out a ritual during which they prepare a *refino* (an aguardiente, distilled from sugarcane), which they combine with the *tzö dapö* to make a sacred beverage called “Saint Rose.” When ingested, it allows



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the ritual specialists to see what would otherwise not be visible, so that they are able to heal, divine, punish, and even mediate between good and evil.

These specialists can be men or women, and they play a very important role: they are bearers of a singular gift based on the knowledge they have acquired, learned, or inherited from the medicinal plants, like the interpretation of dreams and certain techniques for cutting paper to recover the health of their population. More about this later.

Both the ritual specialists and the Otomí population of this region maintain and use “Saint Rose,” and they know that in other contexts it is stigmatized and condemned. For this reason, when she enters the specialists’ dreams, she asks them to protect her, because her head hurts when outsiders approach, and they pull her up. This is an allusion to when the police come to the region and pull up the specialists’ cannabis plants.

The Otomís learned through their dreams to prepare and ingest it, but only the specialists drink the “Saint Rose” to be able to dialogue with the entities, in a trance state. That is how they consult with them about divinations, although they can also read the future using copal and sometimes using cards.

Together with the ritual specialists are the patronesses or godmothers who support and accompany them for the entire process, as well as the musicians, whose music guides them when they go into the trance after ingesting the plant. This allows them to move into another time and space where they can resolve serious problems or requests, unleashing the battle between good and evil.

This feminine personification (“Saint Rose”) communicates through dreams. That is where she shows the specialists how to heal using different techniques, such as divination, trances, the interpretation of dreams, and paper cut-outs that represent the entities and humans, and, as such, act as a vehicle for achieving health. For these cut-outs to have a will and for the ritual to work, their heart must be activated, which is normally done with chicken blood, although sometimes a piece of “Saint Rose” is placed to their left.

Sacred Spaces Where Cannabis Is Personified

Sometimes the ritual specialists see people in their dreams—and this is the most interesting—because what they see is not part of their daily lives. Rather, they arrive at them through certain states of consciousness that allow them to experience them very realistically. For them, these are little visions that come to them, making them feel present and committed to their communities.

Some tell of seeing “Saint Rose” in that trance: some describe her as a little girl; others as a very attractive young woman. However, most agree that it is an older woman who presents herself with that name and is related to Our Lady of Guadalupe. When she appears as an older person, she looks like the women of the region, wearing traditional local clothing, embroidered and with lace, with a shawl and long, grey, pleated hair.



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“Saint Rose” also intercedes for the well-being of the population and that is when she acts as an ally in the rituals dedicated to emotional upset. For this, the specialists eat it to enter into the time and space of the emotions and deal with the relationship between couples who want to fall in love, live together, or marry or to unite a family. This characteristic is very important because in its divine representation, cannabis acts and is concerned about human beings’ emotional side.

“Saint Rose,” more than a powerful entheogenic plant, is a deity with which a constant dialogue is held. For the inhabitants of the Otomí Tepehua Mountains, it is a word that interprets the world. This shows that the only way to understand the Otomí world view is to start with their ceremonial practices.

Landscapes Where Cannabis Lives

In the Otomí Tepehua Mountains, inhabitants co-exist with venerable entities. Their hills, rivers, ponds, waterfalls, caves, and animals make it a fundamental scenario for ritual practices because it is the door to this other sacred time and place where “Saint Rose” manifests herself.

In this world view, rituals—or as they also call them, customs—exist dedicated to the lord and the lady, the male or female chief of the land, of water, of fire, of the air, and to the sacred seeds that are holy in this culture. At times, “Saint Rose” may manifest herself in the body of other people present at these ceremonies; it is very rare,

however, because the most common occurrence is that she only takes over the bodies of the specialists.

Despite all their knowledge, the specialists are not able to glimpse the complete scope of the regulation of cannabis and what its use implies for people outside their sphere. Nevertheless, they do take security measures and apply moderation when using it. In any case, any approach to the Otomí region allows us to understand this plant through this culture, which for millennia has safeguarded this interaction with a natural environment overflowing with ancestral, mystical, fascinating traditions. **NM**



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