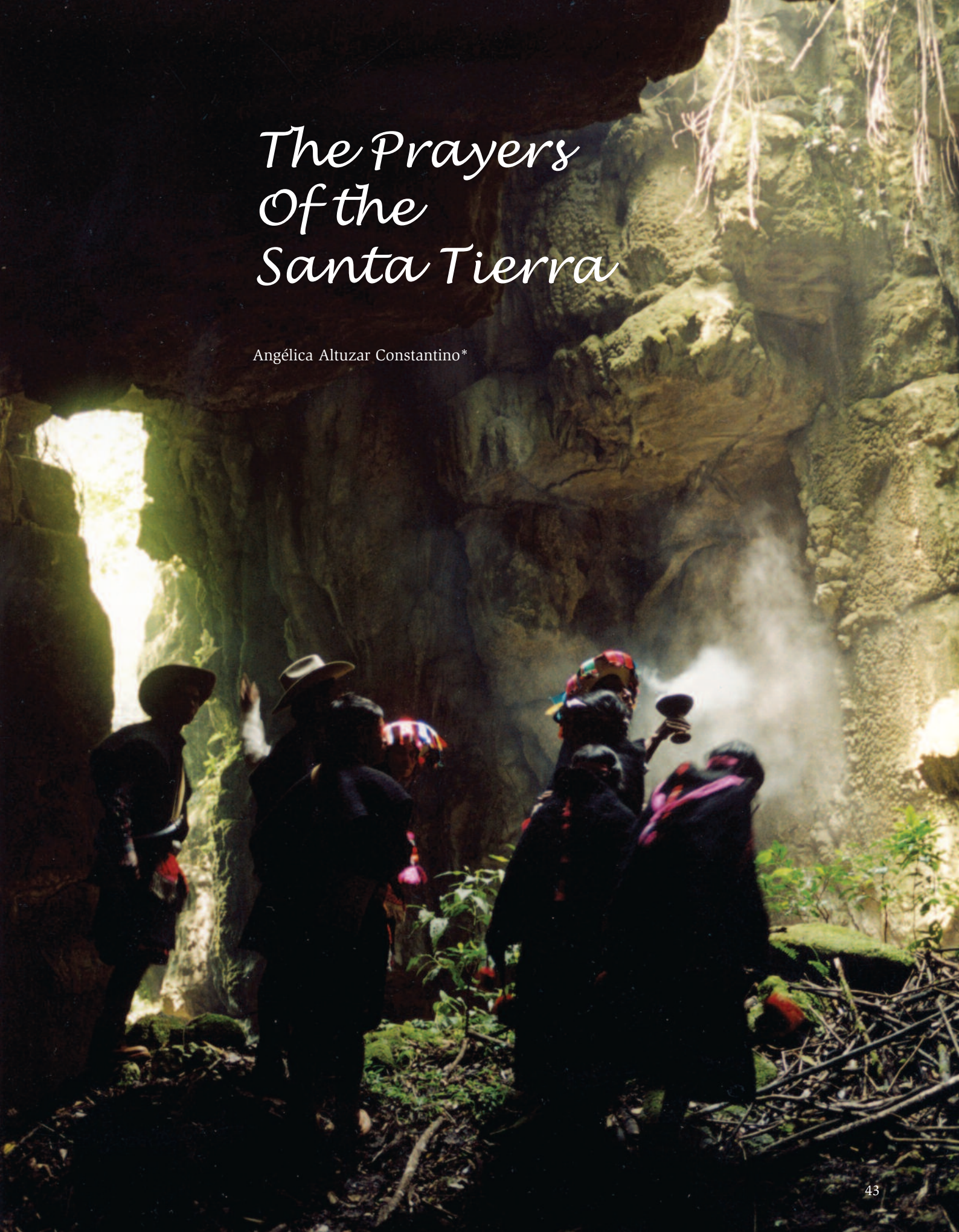


The Prayers Of the Santa Tierra

Angélica Altuzar Constantino*



From the sixteenth century on, the indigenous peoples of Chiapas have resisted conquest in two ways: some by fighting violently to defend their autonomy even at the cost of their lives and others by systematically withstanding attacks and obstacles, holding their beliefs high. This is the case of the lineage of the prayers of the Santa Tierra (Holy Land), who have managed to preserve their main patrimony: the wise words of their ancestors. These words teach them that they must give thanks for the gifts received, for the bounty of the Earth. The prayers' tradition is losing ground; fewer and fewer participants congregate for the ceremony, pressured by the many groups of Catholics and evangelical Christians who dub these ceremonial practices unworthy because for a long time they included excessive drunkenness. In Chiapas, alcohol is a symbol of oppression and the subjection that these people have suffered historically. However, the prayers of the Santa Tierra continue to receive the voices of the Protecting Spirits in their dreams, which show them the way to the true ritual spaces thanks to which the majesty of their beliefs has not been completely lost.

A butterfly-shaped mist descends from the Chiapas Highlands mountains. Its fine tulle wings cover the valley and alight on one of the most serene Tzeltal pieces of land of the municipality of San Juan Cancuc called Bapuz, whose name means "above the *temazcal* steam bath."

In Bapuz, the river roars and the branches sing. Coffee bushes, grass, wild flowers and star hay delight the eye. The inhabitants are awake before dawn, preparing their ascent on the humid, stone-paved paths leading to the sacred hill of Atzam, where salt water bursts from a spring.

For the inhabitants of this land, time is a road. They travel a long way to the sacred mount where the gods reside, where the heart of Mother Earth lives. They walk hours, offering the fatigue and joy in their hearts.

The gifts for the Lord of the Earth are prayers, white candles, effort and the respect of his faithful. They go to the top of the hills to ask him to make the crop grow healthy, to ask for rain, and that the leaves of the bean plant be free of blight. Everyone hopes to see the corn flowers mature into corn cobs and the dark pods of the beans docilely come apart at the touch of the women who will transform them into food for the people of Bapuz.

In the indigenous universe, each member of the community seeks the common well-being, in-

cluding that of the plants, animals and things as well as people; that is, everything, both palpable and intangible. Life in the community makes the reality complete. Each being possesses a spiritual force that nurtures him, her or it and at the same time nourishes the strength of the rest. Corresponding to this feeling is an organized collective experience marked by respect, solidarity and fraternity among the members of Chiapas's different ethnic groups.

The roads of the grass and the stones, the mountain, the field, the greeting and the farewell of the sunlight call each indigenous people to union; the earth, the ancestors, the roots and thousand-year-old traditions handed down by hundreds of generations call to them.

One deep-rooted custom is to purify oneself, fasting three days before a visit to the sacred hill to be worthy of the gods' attention. The faith is unquestionable. It is demonstrated by dancing until the sun sets and the 20 candles presented in offering to the spring, the cave, the ancient fathers and nature burn out.

While the celebration lasts, the soul sings, the landscape smiles. The whole countryside trembles at hearing the harp, rattle and Chamula guitar music. It vibrates to the steps of the dancers who are calling the dwellers of the underworld in company of those who offer up prayers, who with their wise words touch the ears and will of the Lord of the Earth, the Giver of Life, so he will provide for the plots of land, the community and the neighboring towns.

* Cultural journalist working in Coneculta-Chiapas.

Photos by Carlos Martínez Suárez, director of cultural dissemination, Coneculta-Chiapas.

The indigenous prayers belong to a representative lineage. Every worshiper dreamed at an early age what his destiny would be: dedicating his life to a dialogue with the Giver of Gifts, entreating for his brothers and sisters, for his people; caring for the candles of hope and offering the best words, those that come from the heart: the true words. And when words are not enough to say what the soul feels, tears fall, humble and pure like the heart of corn.

Don Alonso Méndez Torres and Don Vicente Cruz López accompanied the main prayers to the venerable rituals from the time they were very small children. And one night when they were young men, they dreamed that they were handed over the sacred papers on which their duty as ministers of the prayers and celebrations of the planting of the corn and beans and the harvest were written.

In the Ixcalom cave, inhabited by spirits of the ancient hill dwellers, white candles are planted so the wise words and the prayers of the wise elders can reach the gods.

Copal is the nourishment for the Earth and the tree branches decorating the altar repeat the ancient ways of understanding life and celebrating the sacred. Music also pours from the heart; it is the true

music that inebriates the understanding of those who implore and those who are idolized. The final melody of each prayer is called Balún Batson: nine pieces of music for the sacred settlement.

Women, men, children, young people and the aged all have the same will: touching the understanding of the gods who live in the bosom of Mother Earth so they may lavish their creatures with favors.

For almost a century, these worshipers have petitioned the support of the Lord of the Earth three times a year for abundance of the squash and grain that feed the municipality. Before the crosses that have blended into the color and texture of the earth, the prayers give themselves over to a deep, mystical, seemingly interminable conversation until they feel that the hill has been pleased to receive the gift of its children.

The fiesta of Ta ajaw, or “visiting the hill” fiesta, ends late at night. The inhabitants of Bapuz come down from the hill and return to their homes, continuing to pray and dance. The true musicians sing their songs dictated to them in dreams by Saint John and Saint Ildefonso, who play with the dwellers of the earth and run after the deer. **MM**



Prayers of the hills in a ceremony asking for corn in the Tzeltal municipality of Tenejapa.



Prayer of the hills in a ceremony marking the beginning of the agricultural cycle in the Tzeltal municipality of Tenejapa.