

Men and Women Healers In Mexico's Indigenous Regions Today

For a culture to become a culture, a series of bases must be developed that bring cohesion to its life and structure day-to-day events. They are symbolic, that is, they are those highly significant questions that nourish and give form to a specific context. One way to approach that culture is to look at the knowledge about men and women indigenous traditional healers in Mexico through the descriptions of their practices. Even though they have a dynamic of social relations with other actors, in their context, they act according to their



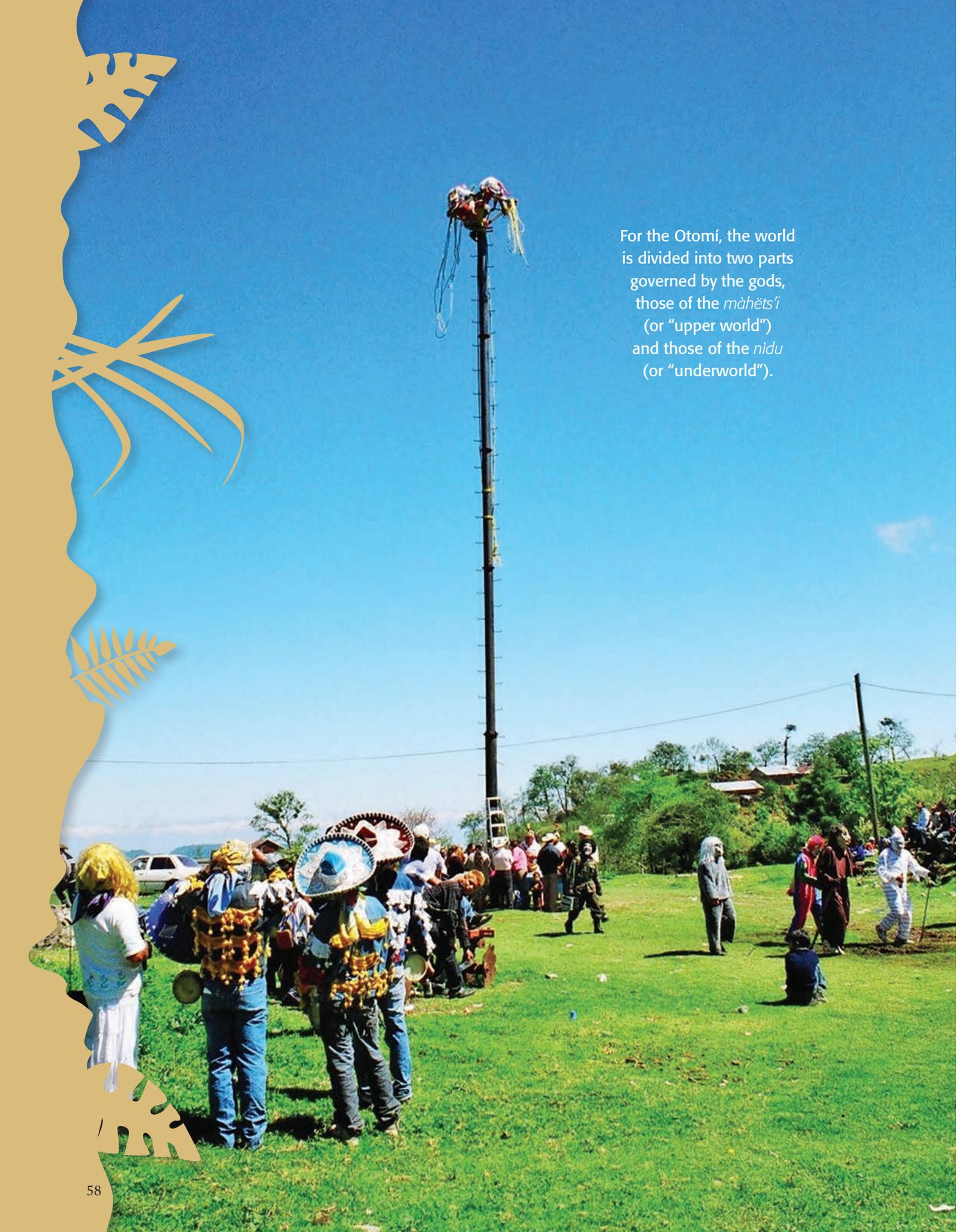
cultural patterns and in relation to other individuals; this is why the personality and recognition of the folk healer is clear to the extent that he or she reproduces the culture of his/her group. That is, the healer is the result of a specific cultural context.

Achieving health in their communities is not traditional healers' only objective. Their function includes offering the community other benefits. One is having knowledge of the cosmos and what inhabits it, as well as being the repository of knowledge of the body and its contents; for that very reason, the folk healer is the initiator of the rituals for establishing health among the population.

This is why we maintain that to be able to approach this topic, we must start from the practices themselves, and not from a pre-established theory. In the following pages, our aim is to show the reader the importance these specialists in healing and their rituals have in four ethnic groups in contemporary Mexico: the Yaqui of Sonora, the Tepehua of the Veracruz Huasteca region, the Nahuas of Puebla's Black Mountains, and the Otomí of Hidalgo's Eastern Mountains.

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Otomí Specialists from Hidalgo's Eastern Mountains¹

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In the Otomí areas of the Tutotepec Mountains, healers acquire knowledge and prestige through a particular way of explaining the world: this relates to the gods, and the specialist is someone with the capacity to connect the living with the dead and use that communication to fix things so that life continues.

The inhabitants of this region live in extremely poor areas; their resources for staying healthy and dealing with illness are scant. For this reason, the Otomí continually seek support from their specialists to alleviate pain, treat disease, and explain the constant sudden deaths of children, young people, and adults. In this context, men and women healers are often the only ones who can deal with these and other concerns of daily life.

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Photos by Patricia Gallardo.



Doing the "cleansing".

For the Otomí, the world is divided into two parts governed by the gods, those of the *màhèts'i* (or "upper world") and those of the *nìdu* (or "underworld"). In this world view, men, women, and gods are inhabited by energies that flow and give them life. One of these is called *nzáki* ("life force") in Otomí. During rituals, whether to pray for rain, to cure a disease, to rid oneself of a curse, or for carnival, anthropomorphic paper figures cut out by the specialists are placed on the altars. For the Otomí, these "bodies" are the *nzáki* of the god, which is activated when the little holes made in the center open and the specialists speak to them in supplication, prayer, or simply chat with them (see left).

The specialists in charge of cutting the paper figures and speaking to the spirits of the gods are called *ya bādi* ("those who know") in Otomí, which, as the name implies, means that

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Creating "life force."

they are men and women who know how to cure disease, speak the language of the gods (through the sounds of bells, whistles, stentorian breathing, and prayer-like speeches), and lead rituals. They are the ones who can explain and give a place to each thing, each element, each situation, each emotion, the ones who can give coherence to their acts and those of others in their two-part cosmos. But, above all, the *ya bādi* have an alliance and communicate with the spirits of the gods attributed with maintaining human life (see above).

Nevertheless, not all Otomí have access to persons of knowledge. To dedicate oneself to the life of ritual, particular skills, attitudes, and aptitudes are required. The transmission of knowledge among the *ya bādi* is a pragmatic issue in which both family and community intervene, in a kind of link that the healer who is just starting out establishes with his/her clientele, so that the *bādi'na's* ("that who knows") learning is always empirical.² On the one hand, it is acquired in the family. The father, mother, aunt, or grandmother teach-

es him/her each of the rules, steps, and ways that must be observed during the rituals. Also, one of his/her daughters or sons is chosen as a successor. Knowledge is also obtained by observing other specialists; that is, they acquire experiences during the rituals themselves.³

However, almost none of these specialists recognizes having gotten his/her knowledge from a relative. To explain this knowledge, they always refer to the “gift” (*yómféni*), or the ability they are born with and that manifests itself associated with illnesses they suffer during childhood and adolescence. This gift is revealed in a dream or when coming into direct contact with the spirits of the gods and “singing” during the rituals. As one specialist I interviewed said, “When you’re a healer, it’s part of your spirit, it’s part of your heart; when you’re little and you cry and cry, they’re going to make their life force to help you” (see below).⁴

The learning is on-going, and consolidating the knowledge requires rites of preparation and acceptance before the gods of the over-world and underworld. Among the Otomí, the initiation is linked to strengthening the *nzáki* and creating a link and an agreement with the gods. To that end, a ritual is held in which the spirits of the gods from the over- and underworld are called: the *bädi’na* cuts paper figures of the *nzáki* of 50 hills which will “be called,” and offerings will be made to them so they bestow their favors on the initiate and give him/her strength. Paper figures of the *nzáki* of the *Màkà Tsíbi* (fire), the *Màkà Dähí* (air), and the *Màkà Déhe* (water) will also be cut. In addition, paper figures of “the life force” of the initiate, consisting of 12 eagles and 12 tigers, the animals that will accompany him/her will be cut out, and then “planted” in a tree. For *Zithü* and the underworld, the world of the dead, a great cleansing is carried out so that “the evil one” also offers its protection to the initiate.

The ritual requires the participation of two little boys and two little girls, who will be the only ones who can touch the water in the gourds placed on the altar because they are “new.”



Speaking with the spirits of the gods.

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This ritual involves offerings of food, wax, and flowers, and the sacrifice of birds. This is the way the gods “are invited” to participate in the initiation of the *bädi’na*. At the end, the initiate is given the instruments with which he or she will begin to work: scissors for cutting paper figures, a baton to lead the rituals with, and pre-Hispanic clay figurines that will accompany him/her and give him/her strength for the ritual life. These are the materials of each specialist’s prestige: the more figurines the *bädi’na* has, the more powerful he/ she will be (see photo below, upper right).

The explanation of the knowledge and power of the *ya bädi* is linked to the body and its components, among which the *nzáki*, or life force, is a fundamental part. It is said that it is a form of energy that runs out, weakens, strengthens, and is distributed throughout the body. When the person gets old and becomes ill, the *nzáki* weakens and when the person dies, it leaves the body.⁵ Some people may have a stronger *nzáki* than others, as is the case with the *bädi’na* who is attributed with a more potent *nzáki* than that of the rest of the population; for this very reason, he/she shares his/her life force with his/her patients. Both the gods and the *ya bädi* are capable of manipulating their *nzáki* and letting it flow to injure other people or to send it to care for and protect their patients and ritual relatives (see photo below, lower right).⁶



Initiation ritual.

Among the Otomí, the initiation is linked to strengthening the *nzáki* (“life force”) and creating an agreement with the gods.



The offering for the gods of the underworld.



The ritual.

Everything indicates that among the Otomí, the knowledge and power derived from prestige of the *ya bādi* are explained in the intensity of the *nzāki* and their ability to channel it to balance and foster a favorable outcome, so that the *bādi'na* has to assume his/her role as a specialist. This means that his/her effectiveness lies in having a fortunate experience when undertaking an encounter with the spirits of the gods during the ritual. In the eyes of the spectators and the community, this is what gives him/her value, a position, and importance, the aim of which will be to maintain and strengthen the alliance with the gods (see photo above). **MM**

NOTES

¹This article is the product of the fieldwork I have been doing since October 2006 in the state of Hidalgo among the Otomí of San Bartolo Tutotepec and two communities in Huehuetla. Among the Otomí, I have worked particularly with the inhabitants of Pie del Cerro, El Kandehe, San Miguel, Pueblo Nuevo, El Encinal, Tutotepec, Xuchitlán, El Mavodo, San Juan, San Jerónimo, El Veinte, San Andrés, Chicamole, La Huahua, El Nandho, El Jovi6n, and El Progreso. In Huehuetla, I have worked with healers from San Ambrosio and San Francisco.

²In the San Bartolo Tutotepec variety of Otomí, the plural is indicated with *ya* and the singular with *na* as a suffix. Thus, the word *bādi'na* would be translated as “he who knows,” and *ya bādi* would be translated as “those who know.” In this article, I have used the Otomí word to refer to these specialists to show in more detail how they are understood: men and women who know of the rituals, of the myths, of the “custom,” in addition to healing.

³In other regions, like the Huasteca, healers also learn through technical instruction from a person or an institution, through books of herbal medicine and esotericism, and by attending courses organized by government institutions like the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI). In the case of the Otomí, these kinds of institutional relationships have not been developed; what is more, in the San Bartolo Municipality, the healers do not refer to themselves or their work as that of “traditional doctors,” since that term was first used by the CDI’s predecessor, the National Indigenist Institute (INI).

⁴Here, the speaker means that the healer will “make the life force” by cutting paper figures of it to use in the ritual to help the patient.

⁵As James Dow explains it, “The life force of beings is called *zaki*....However, *zaki* is not a complete personality; it is only the vital essence that makes up a personality. This is indicated in the translation which is ‘life force,’ and not ‘anima’ or ‘soul.’ *Zaki* is an element of the personality that goes beyond the conscious being. A person who is discouraged has lost his/her *zaki*. He/she will become ill because he/she has lost what allows him/her to deal with the challenges of life; this is why the aim of many healing ceremonies is to restore the patient’s *zaki*.” James Dow, *Santos y supervivencias*, Presencias Collection (Mexico City: INI/Conaculta, 1990), p. 95.

⁶As Jacques Galinier explains it, “The *nzahki*’s very volatility makes it possible to direct it in the opposite direction toward the person manipulating it. The increase in the quantity of energy that circulates among humans produces an imbalance, usually a thermodynamic imbalance, as an excess of heat or of cold....The ambivalent character of the *nzahki* explains why the shaman is seen as a privileged actor, capable of preserving the lives of men (because of his/her healing role) or of taking them, manipulating the same paraphernalia, ‘speaking’ with the same entities of nature, the pillars of energy. All the work of the *bādi'na*, ‘he/she who knows,’ consists of deploying this energy from a pole that generates it toward a patient or a victim.” Jacques Galinier, “Equilibrio y desequilibrio en el cosmos. Concepciones de los otomíes orientales” (Mexico City: unpublished manuscript, 2007), p. 2.