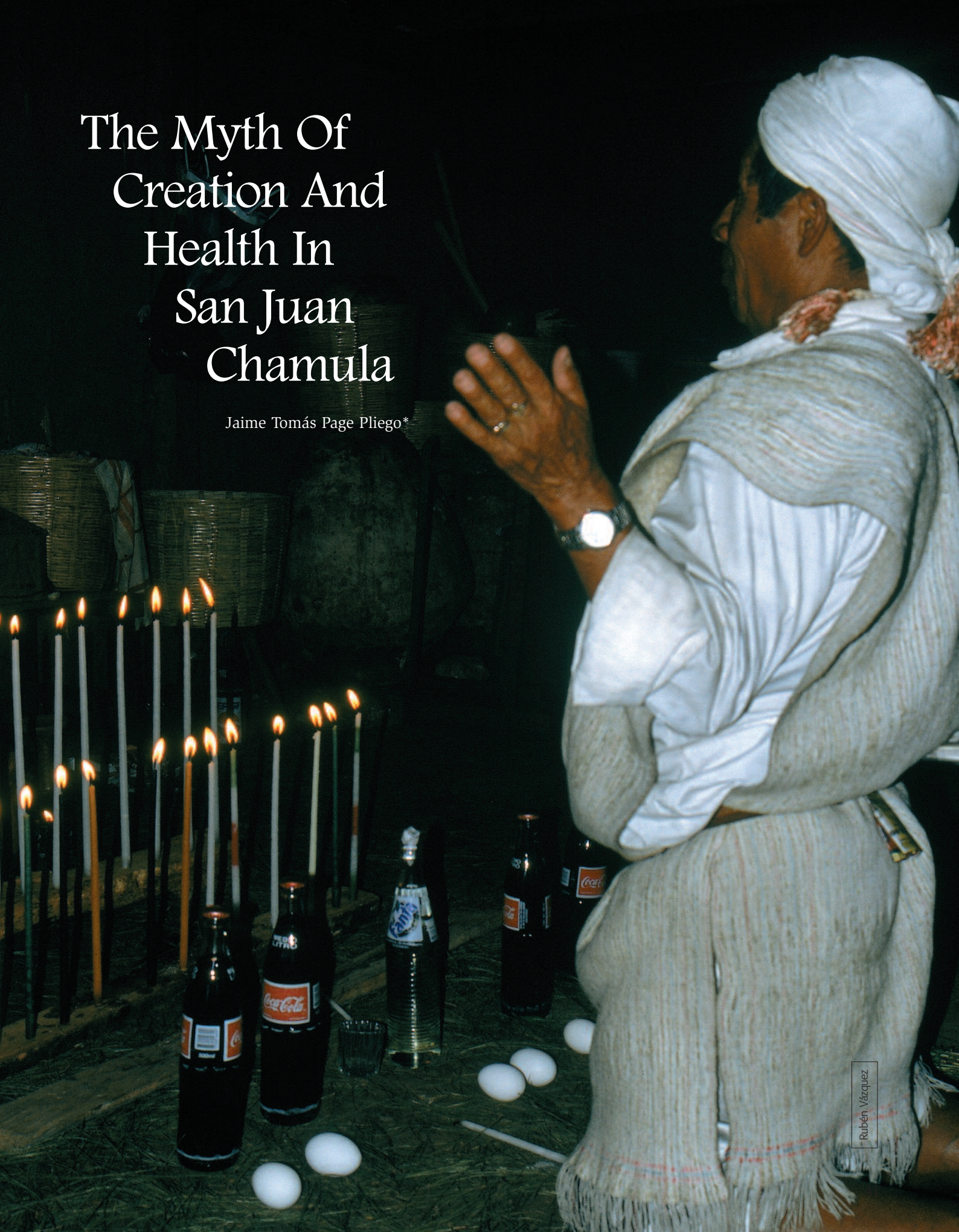


The Myth Of Creation And Health In San Juan Chamula

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Rubén Vázquez



The visitor's impression of religious activity in the San Juan Chamula church is unforgettable. The luminous offerings made of candles, copal, flowers, soft drinks, traditional San Cristóbal de las Casas *coletto* bread, hens or black roosters and *pox* (liquor made from sugar cane) hit the viewer straight on. All this is softened by the rhythmic, monotonous oratorio singing of the *j'iloletic* ("those who can see") to try to help rescue the *ch'ulel* or some other animus from the bodies of the ill who have asked for their intermediation before the gods.

The ill, clearly distinguishable by their weakness and disarray, and their families surround the *j'iloletics*, who make the offerings and petitions to the saints and apostles, grossly obese from many layers of clothing and wearing one or three mirrors at the height of their hearts as a symbol of their supernatural luminosity. This ambiance evokes a pre-Hispanic past strongly imbued by Catholic Christian elements, which has been called Indocolonial.

However, most of the healing rituals are carried out in patients' homes or by natural springs or in caves. They are done in churches only when the extreme gravity of the patient's condition demands it.

Undoubtedly, this scene prompts innumerable questions that cannot be resolved in the limited space of this article. But, even so, I will attempt to sketch the reasons that give meaning to the existence not only of the Chamulas, but also of the Tzotzil Indians in other municipalities.

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First, we have to look at this group's origins. It is said that the Tzotzil-Tzeltals come from Central Guatemala, from the tribe of the house of the Zotzils, which, to avoid being subjected by the Cakchiquel (a people who lived in Central Guatemala), stole fire from them, which they used to subdue their neighbors.¹ With fire in their power, they emigrated north and occupied part of the Comitán plains, the eastern valleys of the Grijalva and what today are the Highlands, all in Chiapas.²

The Chamulas are descendants from this group of Tzotzils. Their municipality, San Juan Chamula, is in the central mountains of Chiapas, and their world view jibes with their Central American origins, given that it is based on those peoples' myth of creation. This myth says that the ultimate reason the deities (*Riox*)³ had to lend themselves to the creation of different versions of humanity was to leave on Earth beings whose foremost, if not sole, task was to sustain celestial deities. The myth holds that, after three attempts and failures, "the Creator, the Forger and the Progenitors" exclaimed in a single voice,

Let us make him who will sustain and feed us! How will we manage to be invoked, to be remembered upon the earth? We have already tested our first creatures with our first labors; but we could not consummate being praised and venerated by them. Let us try now to make obedient, respectful beings that will sustain and feed us. Thus they spake.⁴



The Old Church of San Juan Chamula next to the cemetery. Photo: Rubén Vázquez



We call this divine purpose the “prime mandate”.⁵ Not fulfilling this mandate is enough reason for the deities to coerce and, in extreme cases, exterminate different humanities they created. The *Popol Vuh* explains in the myths of origin that several humanities were created and destroyed.⁶ The flesh of the first men was made of mud, but it disintegrated; the second attempt was made with wood,⁷ but they had no soul and “they did not remember their Creator, their Former.” Other woods, “*tzité* and *espadaña*”, were used for the third group of men, but they neither spoke nor thought.⁸ Lastly, the fourth humanity, the current one, was created with yellow and white corn cobs.⁹ This humanity is still imperfect because of its lack of constancy and proclivity to sin, but it has the ability to fulfill the prime mandate, above all because its defects can be to a certain extent neutralized through suffering.

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Given that the ultimate aim of humanity is to provide the Gods with food, that is, fulfill the “prime mandate”, and to do that required appropriate conditions, *Riox* set up the Earth and the Cosmos to that end by creating a vertical structure of the world that would accommodate the hierarchies among the deities and between the gods and humanity. In this cosmography, Yan Vinajel (Heaven) is placed at the top, here God the Father, “Jesuschrist-Sun”, the “Virgin of Saint Mary-Moon” and, recently, Our Lady of Guadalupe reside. Between Heaven and Earth 13 strata were placed, each occupied by different supernatural elements. Among them are Jerusalem, where the souls of the dead reside until the day of the Last Judgment and one which for the moment is uninhabited but will later supposedly become Hell. Other strata contain what is beautiful, dangerous and prohibited, all present in the Tzotzil imaginary. According to divine plan, these strata constitute different tricks for making the *ch’ulel* (shadow or soul) fall from those people who have not fulfilled the prime mandate.¹⁰ At the Earth’s surface there are two more strata, the *Osil Balamil* (the surface of the Earth), which is inhabited by humans and secondary deities, and *Olol* (under the Earth’s surface), where a humanity of small beings lives that preceded humanity on the surface of the Earth.¹¹

Those secondary deities that share the Earth’s surface with humanity are separated into two groups. In the first are the apostles and saints from the Catholic pantheon, who reside in churches and family altars. The second group is made up of the deities who inhabit the natural surroundings; they belong to the pre-Hispanic pantheon, although today they are represented as angels. They are in charge of providing or depriving humanity of sustenance, health and illness.





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The last fundamental element in structuring the world for fulfilling the “prime mandate” is related to humanity. The Tzotzil conceives himself not only as a body (*Bec'talil*), but also as being composed of by several animuses among them: *C'al*, a synonym of life energy, can be translated from Tzotzil as “heat”; *Ch'ulel* might correspond to the shadow described by the Nahuas; *Vayijelil*, or animal companion, several of which might coexist with one body; and *Quibal* or *Nahual*, present only in the case of individuals with extreme powers. Most of the animuses that make up the Tzotzil person move at night through a space called *Yan Vinajel-Yan Balamil* (Another Heaven-Another Earth).

According to how many of these elements are present, we can build the following typology of the Tzotzil person:

- 1) A weak and sickly person is made up of two or three weak, sickly bodies; three weak *ch'ulel*, which are difficult to keep confined to the body and frequently bring on illness; and three small *vayijelil*.
- 2) A normal person has two or three healthy, more or less strong bodies, capable of doing agricultural and domestic labor; from three to six normal *ch'ulel*, with a tendency to regularly leave the body at night to go wandering about; plus between three and six *vayijelil*, one of which may be strong, such as a medium-sized feline (a bobcat or ocelot). Most Tzotzils fall within this category.

- 3) A complete Tzotzil person is made up of two or three strong, healthy bodies; between nine and 13 strong *ch'ulel* and between nine and 13 strong *vayijelil*, which may be large predators, mammals or birds.
- 4) A person with extraordinary powers has more than 13 strong *ch'ulel* and the same number of *vayijelil*, although he/she may have 36 or up to 75 of each. These individuals invariably have the gift of transmutation, or *quibal*, and therefore, depending on where they are, they will be powerful *totilme'iletic* or *j'iloletic*, that is, of great aid and protection for the community or a terrifying danger (if they are on the side of evil) because they will be eaters of *ch'ulel* through their *quibaltic*.¹²



All this allows us to return to the church and try to elucidate the ceremony and the function of the objects on the altar before which the *j'iloletics* sing.

- These objects are the patient's offerings to feed *Riox*, placed before an intermediary apostle who is begged that he "raise them up."
- They understand that *Riox* feeds on heat (they place candles there), smells (they light the copal and place soft drinks, bread and flowers there) and the words in song sung by the *j'ilol*.
- In his song, the *j'ilol* asks the divinity to forgive the patient his/her faults and to restore its protection; he promises in the name of Hell that the patient will change his/her ways and fulfill the "prime mandate".
- He also begs for support for the liberation and return to the body of any animus that may have been lost or trapped and/or sold by any of the secondary deities of the natural surroundings. This animus will be exchanged for the blood of a hen destined for sacrifice.



Rubén Vázquez





- In this process, from time to time, the officiator sprays the alcoholic beverage *pox* on the altar “to give it to the Devil, to confuse him.”
- As the supplication advances, the patient’s pulse is taken to see if he/she is improving and to discover what other actions or charms are required, because deities speak to the *j’ilol* through the blood.

Thus, as the *j’ilol* helps the patient to heal, he also redirects the Tzotzils back onto the path of fulfilling the prime mandate, a function more like that of a priest than a shaman. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Adrián Recinos, trans., *Popol Vuh: Antiguas historias del Quiché* (Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1952 and 1961), p. 115.

² Antonio García de León, *Resistencia y Utopía* (Mexico City: Ediciones Era, 1985), p. 28.

³ The term *Riox* is not used in the first person, like God, but as the divinity in its totality, as Gossen said, “Although *Riox* is loaned from the Spanish word *Dios* (God), the meaning of the Tzotzil term is much more general than the Spanish one. *Riox* alludes to an entire composite of religious phenomena that include God (synonymous with Htotik, the Sun); individual saints and their images; religious acts...; religious gestures...; and perhaps others.” Gary H. Gossen, *Los chamulas*

en el mundo del Sol. Tiempo y espacio en una tradición oral Maya (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes-Instituto Nacional Indigenista, 1980), pp. 207-209.

⁴ Adrián Recinos, op. cit., p. 27.

⁵ Jaime Tomás Page Pliego, *El mandato divino. Etnomedicina entre los tsotsiles de Chamula y Chenalhó, Chiapas*, Scientific Collection no. 10 (Mexico City: Programa de Investigaciones Multidisciplinarias sobre Mesoamérica y el Sureste-Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas-UNAM, at press), p. 102.

⁶ Recinos, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

⁷ Ibid., p. 29-30.

⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁰ Page, op. cit., p. 122.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 122.

¹² Shamanism places prime importance on the close relationship established between the shaman and certain animals, whether by communicating with them or transforming himself into them. According to Eliade, the link with the animals is a demonstration of his access to the supernatural, the ability to abandon his human condition to transform puts him in control of the material and the subtle, as well as of life and death.

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