Performing the community: representation, ritual and reciprocity in the Totonac Highlands of Mexico

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CHAPTER 5
COSMOLOGY AND MORALITY

All villagers tell historias (histories), but only Totonac villagers are familiar with the local cuentos y chistes (stories and jokes). The first refer to the historical past of Nanacatlan and the Sierra and claim to be historically true, while the cuentos y chistes are not situated in a specific time and place. They are therefore not necessarily ‘true’ or ‘real’ in a historical sense, but are held to be true in a moral sense: they contain the metaphysical and cosmological framework of relationships between the natural, the supernatural, and the human worlds; and as such provide a moral guide for action because they outline the basic categories of good and evil, and stipulate what to do to combat evil.

This chapter deals with ideas about the ways in which people, nature, and supernature are interconnected and the ways in which these ideas structure community life and personal well-being. These connections not only involve paired relationships (between humans and nature, or between humans and supernature) but also mediated relationships: the ways in which humans relate to and interact with nature mediated by the supernatural world i.e., the Patrons (dueños, T. xmalana) of the natural elements or the animals and crops; most of all those of Water, Fire, Air, Earth, Thunder, Rain, Animals, and Maize. According to Ichon (1973:146-149) these secondary gods, as he calls them, are male and female.

In Totonac cosmology in general, the Patrons of Maize, the Sun, and the Moon take a central position, and the cuentos about their origin are remembered while other origin stories have disappeared. Cosmology is a field of agency (Smith 2005:37) and its basic pattern is that human beings can only live in a natural world by entertaining good relations with various Patrons. Misfortunes such as diseases, natural disasters and poverty are attributed to an insulted Patron. The natural and the supernatural worlds constitute one whole, and everyday life of human beings is situated between nature and supernature. To live a good life, humans have to be in harmony with these worlds which means that they have to engage in exchange relationships with them through rituals and religious practices and actions aimed at maintaining or restoring harmony. Similarly, people have to maintain a balance with their fellow-humans with whom they interact through networks of reciprocity

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1 As explained in the previous chapter, there is only one Totonac word (likatzin) for stories that are ‘real’ and this is mainly used for historias. Totonacs use Spanish to differentiate between them according to historical reality or legend/myth but even then add whether the story is reality or not, because some cuentos are also ‘real’. I use cosmology and worldview interchangeably.
providing mutual support (see Ichon 1973; Baez et al. 1992; Chenaut 1990; Ellison 2001, 2004; Lammel and Nemes 1992; Kelly 1953; Smith 2005).

Among the Nanacatlán Totonacs, cosmological views tend to be of a very practical nature and they usually refer to them as guidelines for action when they face difficult or unusual situations. Illness, bad dreams, worries, feelings of guilt, gossip and nagging, or sudden sounds or movements at night often trigger stories and discussions about what rules have been broken and what should be done to make amends. People often know themselves what to do, but when problems are too big to handle, implying that relations with the supernatural world have been seriously disturbed, they turn to intermediaries such as healers (curanderos, T. macuchina) and sorcerers (brujos, T. skuwana).

Cosmology pertains to a relatively secret world and Totonacs do not easily talk about it. They tend to shield it off and conceal their views on disease and misfortune from the mestizo villagers, as they know pretty well that such views are easily labelled as ‘backward’ or ‘unchristian’. It was only after I was better known to people that they would tell cuentos and would speak about susto (fright T. pikuan or tlhawan), mal aire (evil air, T. lakthawan án or nitlan án), or mal de ojo (the evil eye), and explain how one could fall ill or run into trouble by misbehaving or not abiding customary rules (costumbres).

That this worldview is a Totonac affair – and strictly speaking not a local cosmology – becomes evident as these basic views are shared among Catholic and Protestant Totonacs. Catholics tend to equate some of the Patrons with saints, but Protestants, although they stress that there is only one God and no semi-Gods like the Catholic saints, have no fundamental objections against dueños and the role they play in causing illness and misfortune. Some Protestants argue that their religious beliefs provide more effective protection against ill-willing Patrons than Catholicism does. If Geertz is right in saying that religion deals with the chaos of inexplicability, suffering, and injustice by providing a “model of reality” explaining the world and a “model for reality” to guide behaviour (Geertz 1973:93-94); then Totonac cosmology is a religion shared across denominations: it provides meaning; explains suffering and evil; and outlines a moral community that includes the living, the dead, the Patrons and God (cf. Baez et al. 1992:28). This does not necessarily mean that the ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ aspects are complementary or equally important. The possible disjunction between both aspects enables the incorporation of new ideas and practices. Though people try to create a coherent worldview, this attempt can be a force for transformation as much as for stability (Sewell 1999:47-48).

2 See also Verrips 1983:5-6, 232-235. Asad (2003) opposes the idea of a universal concept of religion and is thus critical of Geertz whose definition he sees as a modern, privatised Christian version that emphasizes the priority of belief as a state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world. Though I agree with Asad that religion is about power and practice, and that this is to a large extent neglected by Geertz, I find the ‘model of’ and ‘model for’ aspects useful tools for looking at Nanacateco cosmology as a distinct field of meaning and practice kept separate and even hidden by Nanacatecos.
Religion and cosmology

Nowadays in the Sierra people from different denominations more or less coexist peacefully. In Nanacatlán three quarters of the population are Catholic and the four religious minorities – the two congregations of Baptists, Pentecostals, and Jehovah Witnesses – are thus each small. What is more fundamental however is not just the number of converts, but the fact that when alternative religions entered the region local Catholicism lost its religious monopoly and the religious specialists much of their control. Catholics in Nanacatlán often do not distinguish between the various new denominations and refer to them plainly as evangelicos or protestantes. They only know a few things about the most obvious differences and see Protestantism as a serious break with the past, which they perceive as characterised by religious unity. They fail to understand how a religion without feasts, offerings, and images is possible and how Protestants can make a clean break with the ancestors. Through the wooden walls of the Baptist church they heard the Texan reverend call Baptists “children of God” and all others “children of the devil”. They also heard him oppose vaccination, something that they do not understand as they themselves just started benefiting from prophylaxis, and they feel confirmed in their view when a child from a Baptist family dies of measles. They are startled when they observe the split in two churches among both Pentecostals and Baptists and the regular switching from one church to the next (Pentecostals turning Baptist); all this only confirms their suspicions.

On the other hand members of the new religions, especially the women, see their conversion as liberation and modernity. They welcome the strict rules for personal behaviour such as the explicit prohibition to drink alcohol or beat one’s wife and children. Many are proud of being part of a large worldwide movement, and they contrast it to local Catholicism that they see as backward and parochial, largely organised by villagers with only marginal outside interference. They do not appreciate the time-consuming religious cargo system, so important for many Catholics, and they only engage in compadrazgo to a limited extent. It saves them from the many obligations involved, that they apparently perceive as outweighing the benefits. When political tensions ran high in the first half of the 1990s, the differences increased between Protestants (invariably followers of the ruling PRI) and a number of active Catholics who supported the new opposition party. These differences became apparent during the many occasions of ritual exchange and cooperation, as I explain in the next chapter.

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3 See Garma 1984, 1986 and 1987. For a general analyses of the change to Protestantism in Latin America see inter alia Martin 1993; Motley 1996; Stoll 1990.

4 Ignorance of religious minorities among Catholics in Mexico is widespread. Followers of these religions however, do have knowledge about Catholicism because they are often converts. Both Catholics and followers of religious minorities hold stereotypical views about each other (Garma 1998).
Notwithstanding all the differences, Catholic and Protestant Totonacs have many elements of their worldview in common – even with regard to the Patrons as the interface between nature and supernature. By relating to the natural environment through Patrons of natural elements and animals, the natural and supernatural worlds are fused. Human beings are only able to survive in this world through their relations with these various Patrons.\(^5\) Some Patrons have become equated with Catholic saints. The Holy Trinity is the Patron of the Sun for some, while for others it is Jesus Christ and Christ or God (often called San Manuel) is mentioned as the Patron of Maize. The Archangel Miguel is the Patron of Wind and Air (a manifestation of the dead), and San Miguel of Rain and Thunder and therefore of agriculture.\(^6\) San Isidro is Patron of bulls, and San Antonio of the domestic animals. Other dueños directly protect human beings: Santiago is village Patron and thus protects the village and villagers, the Virgen de Guadalupe (Patron Saint of Mexico) protects villagers working in Mexico City, and María Lourdes protects fishermen in the river. Even so, there is a lot of confusion and disagreement on who is who and what does what; and of course Protestants will not speak of saints at all, while even Catholics over the years started to emphasize the difference between God and saints by reiterating that “there is only one God”.

Everyone agrees though that Patrons exist and that in order to avoid misfortune it is essential to maintain good relations with them. To honour them and to prevent their anger, they should not be disturbed at noon because that’s when they rest. Men and women have to stop working, as tilling the soil, fetching water, or buying maize means bothering the Patrons. People speak respectfully about these entities, but also matter-of-factly, as they are a normal feature of life.

Where Catholics and Protestants obviously differ in their reverence with regards to Patrons and God is the house altar that has a central place in the house of every Catholic. For Catholics this is the place to meet and honour Patron-saints, God, and the ancestors; and for them it would be unthinkable not to honour them according

\(^5\) While nature is often conceptualised as a passive resource at the disposal of human beings in Western thought, the Totonacs of Nanacatlan make every effort to maintain good relations with the patrons or owners of the natural world. Western environmentalists opposing what they call the exploitation of the earth tend to restrict human interventions in the natural world as much as possible. Although this may be necessary under certain dramatic circumstances, in general it often means that projects that do not take people’s needs into account are bound to cause more problems than they solve. Such a view of nature leaves hardly any room for the obvious human interests, no matter how much they may depend on nature for their daily needs, and has been appropriately called an ecocentric view of nature by Einarsson (1993:77), who himself advocates considering people as a natural part of ecosystems, and thus taking local needs and wishes into account instead of solely focusing on the environment. He relates this last tendency to the anthropomorphization of nature and the questioning in general of the rift between nature and culture (1993:78).

\(^6\) For the northern highlands, San Juan Aktsín, the Patron of Thunder and Rain is also the patron of Water and one of the most important Totonac deities (Ichon 1973:45). Contrary to the northern highland Totonac, Aktsín’ is often equated with San Miguel in the southern highlands (Ellison 2004:234). Aktsín’ is related to Saint John by coastal Totonacs and to Saint Bartholomew in the Totonac highland village of Coyutla. Romero (1999:64-65) relates San Miguel to the Totonac deity Jílí or God of Lighting, also called El Trueno Viejo.
to custom with dishes during major celebrations or with a candle and flowers on a Patron's holiday. They know that not doing so during Todos Santos would defy the ancestors who will seek revenge and punish the offenders. They repeat the stories about people struck by misfortune when they did not include chicken in the offerings when they had enough money to buy one (sanctions do not apply to those who cannot afford a complete set of dishes). Protestants do not have a house altar anymore. They consider saints and ancestral offerings superstitious and make a clear break with them. Instead, they focus on direct relations with God; it is to Him they present their food gifts, but only on the church altar not at home.

In the remainder of this chapter I focus on the three fields most relevant for conceptualising Totonac cosmology: living and livelihood; the self; and misfortune and evil.

The origin of maize and daily food

Nanacatecos know little about the origin of the world, the people, or the animals. When I asked whether they knew any, they would refer to the Bible, but could hardly tell biblical stories of the creation for themselves. In strong contrast to the absence of such stories about the way the world came into being, are the well-known stories about the origin of maize and the origin of the sun and the moon. Apparently, they offer an explanation of what people consider to be vital for everyday survival and the reproduction of life: the supply of a staple food and the fertility of women as well as the earth through the influence of men, moon, and sun. Maize as the main food crop is the centre of attention as there is always the memory of hunger (see previous chapter) and the fear of hunger in these years of recurrent economic crises. The ideas expressed in stories about the origin of maize are crucial to understanding the way it is treated as a crop, as food, and in providing (a partial) insight into the division of labour along gender lines.

Origin stories

The story of the origin of maize in Nanacatlán has ants discovering the maize and a woodpecker hitting the rock that hides the maize. This resembles a version in nearby Huehuetla (Ellison 2004:247-248) and Nahua versions, more than northern highland Totonac ones (see Ichon 1973:87). Pedro told the following version:

How maize was discovered

The ants had already discovered maize, but they had no way of getting it, because it was lying underneath a big rock. But this poor animal, the woodpecker (pajaro carpintero), tried to open the rock and he started to rap and rap the rock until it broke. But the poor woodpecker fainted because a piece of rock accidentally hit him, and that is why this bird has a red spot on the head, where the rock hit. When the bird fainted, the ants (hormigas arrieros) saw their chance to take out the maize. Another animal, the vulture (zopilote),
saw its chance to take the good maize. When the poor woodpecker came to himself, there was no maize left; only waste, totally trodden upon. The woodpecker also took his part, but the good maize was already flattened. That is why today our maize is so flat; it shouldn’t be flat, but rounded off like a clove of garlic. those from below (los abajenos), the ants, took the maize below. Those from above (los arribeños), the vultures, took it up with them. The poor woodpecker took the kernels, and although they were flattened, the heart of the kernels was still alive and the maize germinated soon. After three months the milpa was completely germinated. Those from above did not know how to treat the maize and they came to ask the woodpecker when they saw how high the maize had already grown, two meters or one and a half. The woodpecker decided to fool them and told them to boil the kernels and then sow them. It didn’t work so they came back to ask again. This time he told them to grind it first, because sometimes they germinate like that. When it didn’t work again the one from above got so angry that he came back with a strong wind and all the milpas fell down, and broke in three pieces. The one from below wanted his maize back and the one from above got all worried and started to put back the stems. And when the one from below snuck close to see how he did it, he saw how he blew his nose and used the mucus to stick the stems together. That is why today the stems of the milpa have something that is like mucus. The woodpecker told him how to sow his maize and he did so, but the maize needs a year to grow. But here we can harvest twice a year. Above (higher in the mountains) however, in Zacatlán, Tetela, and Zacapoaxtla they can sow only once a year, because the maize doesn’t do anything until March. This is the history of the maize and of those who trod upon it. (Pedro Ramos 1989)

Don Felix told me about the origin of maize as an explanation of a dance, los Tejoneros (see annex 6), that I saw first in the neighboring village of Zitlala.

The dance of Los Tejoneros

The bird [in the dance] is the Patron of Maize. When there was nothing, not a single maize and nobody knew where to find it, and there was nothing for sale either; ants (hormigas arrieros), the ones that break off leaves, went to take out the maize. Some went looking where it came from, out of a rock, but they could not open it. A gentleman came, Nacho, he was the only one who said, “I will do it”, with his head. Now we see a red spot on the head of the woodpecker [Nacho is thus man as well as bird], because of

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7 The role of vultures in the finding of maize is somewhat mysterious and I have not found its presence in Aztec or Maya versions. The similarity of this Nanacateco version with others is striking however. Seler (1909) writes how in Aztec legend the God Quetzalcoatl went west to look for maize, in the mountain of provisions Tonacatepetl and that the ants showed him the way. Ichon (1973:68-71) points at the similarities between Aztec and Maya versions when describing a Maya myth where ants discover the maize and carry it off, while first a fox and later other animals and human beings come looking. The human beings ask the Gods of Rain for help and the most important Rain God asks the woodpecker to find the easiest spot to break the rock. God himself breaks it and a piece falls on top of the woodpecker, whose head has been red ever since (see also Petrich 1982:37; for the Tzeltal: Slocum 1965). According to Ichon the Sun is an assimilation of the Maize God. I did not find any outspoken connection between the sun and maize, nor a link with rain, in Nanacatlán but following Ellison 2004 (esp. 250-255) the sun-maize link is obvious.
the blood when he broke the rock. He went down, because of the blow, he looked like he was dead. The ants carried the maize down and when Nacho came to himself, almost all the maize was gone. Now the maize is flat, new maize is downtrodden. The badger [in the dance] is killed because he steals maize, and that is why he is not loved. (Felix Ramos 1989)

Ellison (2004:250) also mentions Los Tejoneros as a performance of the discovery of maize and though the dance is also known in other parts of Mexico I have not come across a similar explanation. Central in the dance is a tall pole with long strings of coloured paper wrapped around it, covered with leaves. On top of the pole is a woodpecker, and about a quarter of the way up is a stuffed badger (tejon). The foot of the pole is kept out of view by a screen of cloth about two meters high where the dancers, all males, go in and out; some dressed as men and some as women (called Huehues). The most important part of the dance causes much excitement in the public, and is when a man standing far out of the scene points a rifle to kill the badger while someone else pulls a rope so that it looks as if the badger really is moving in a death-struggle. Thereafter another rope is pulled and the woodpecker slowly moves down, rapping the pole (again, this looks quite realistic), removing the paper and thus uncovering the maize.

What seems a theme in both stories, apart from the central role of maize itself, is that they reflect an opposition between agriculture and hunting. The badger is a carnivore but also eats maize, just like humans. It is not a taboo animal, but is hunted to be eaten and to protect the maize crop.8

Another well-known origin story about the sun and the moon – givers of life – does not refer to maize but explains how the other ingredients of staple food (chilli and tomatoes) came into being and how they were used to invent the salsa, the sauce eaten daily with tortillas (though this is not apparent from the title of the story). Both the sun and maize are central Patrons, often equated to God or Jesus Christ. In a version mentioned by Ichon (1973:63) the sun is discovered under a rock, just as the discovery of maize. This is how Pedro told it:

The tobacco grower and the sun

The plants of a tobacco grower were very often destroyed, but he could not find out who did this until he saw a grey lizard. He started chasing the lizard and found it sitting on a beautiful, bright stone, as big as a marble. He took it home, but his two daughters started fighting about it because they both wanted it. One put it into her mouth and swallowed

8 The badger symbolises agriculture as well as hunting and can be seen as a mediator between man the agriculturalist and man the hunter (both activities are taboo for women). It could be that the vulture in the version of Pedro is the mediator between hunting and agriculture as well, but most of all he exemplifies the advantages of agricultural life. In a funny story I was repeatedly told in the village, a vulture changes clothes with a lazy man, who dislikes agriculture and thinks it is far easier to just fly around for food. The vulture prefers agriculture above the difficulties of looking for carrion, and takes his place and is content with his life. The man finds that his new life is too hard and he dies of hunger. ‘Changing clothes’ is a way of expressing bodily transformations (Viveiros 2002), see further below.
it. After a while she got pregnant and a little boy was born. When the boy was growing up he always told his grandmother that he would be the sun, but she did not believe him. When he was big, he went East and asked the people present to tell a young man who would pass by later, that he had gone West. He had already told his grandmother that she should look out for a sign at 12 o’clock noon and that she should stick a pole on that spot. The other young man, the one whose coming had been prophesied, was late because he had said goodbye to his lovers, his fiancées; because he had lingered so long, the other boy could go ahead. When he asked where the other had gone, the people said he went westwards. And this young man, already worried, passed by to disappear between the ashes.9 How could he ever catch up with the boy who had gone east? At the start of the day, he [the sun] already appeared in the east. And in the afternoon one can see the moon, as silver, because he does not radiate his own light.

This is how it went and like he had told his grandmother, at noon some signs fell down, three drops of blood. The grandmother put some sticks there and during that day peppers, tomatoes, and chile de arbol (the biggest ones that are very spicy, much more than the green peppers) started growing. The tomatoes were of the longer variety. The grandmother of the sun wondered what she could do with it and started trying. She set the example, by preparing the tomatoes and the chillies and the green peppers, and cooking them on the fire. She started tasting, and it was very tasty. And until nowadays we still use this sauce of green peppers and tomatoes. And this is the history of the boy who comes from the tobacco grower; that is were it started, and he became the sun.

This is a story (cuento) or something like a history (historia). (Pedro Ramos 1989)

The origin stories obviously show that food eaten daily (maize and salsa) is God/Sun-given, and the donation of blood by the Sun is common in Totonac versions (Ichon 1973:71). Other aspects receive equal attention, such as how men and women are involved. A clear example is the relation between the moon and women: the moon has various lovers, which suggests that the moon (T. papá) and a woman are a couple. Ichon (ibid: 65-66) cites a Totonac myth that explicitly states the moon is the husband of all women and is allowed to visit women once a month (T. papá), the reason why they menstruate.

The sun is a different story. Although the sun is also a male, his relations are with relatives: his mother, and notably his grandmother. The sun is born of a virgin who became pregnant after her father brought a bright stone home. After the sun-grandson has sent down some drops of his blood that became crops, the grandmother invents the sauce that always goes with the tortillas. But most important, the sun together with water is the main source of fertility of the fields.

Due to their constant competition (because the moon is trying to catch up with the sun) the moon and the sun are not only beneficial. Their fights result in eclipses.

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9 This part of the story is unclear. This may be because a part of the story is not remembered well anymore, about the way the boy who became the sun managed to do so by going into a big fire, while the other boy tried to do the same but the fire had already turned into ashes, and he thus became the moon (Ichon 1973:66).
This makes the moon the source of evil. According to Masferrer (1986a:30) the moon is male and dangerous one: brujos talk with the moon to make people die.\footnote{See also Lammel and Nemes 1992:189. According to Kelly (1953:186) the firm belief in a male moon among lowland and highland Totonacs is one of the elements which suggests non-Mesoamerican ties. Córdoba (1990:24) however, mentions a female moon related to the Virgin Mary, in Huehueta. Kelly (ibid. 185) also mentions as non-Mesoamerican and more Circum-Caribbean the artificial germination of maize, the fact that earth is not heaped about the base of the maize plant, women sharing agricultural work in the fields, and the use of clay pots as beehives. Only the first applies to Nanacatlán. Women do not work the fields; they harvest coffee and vegetables though never on the milpa, but in neighbouring villages like Tuxtla and Zongozotla women work in agriculture.} A lunar eclipse, Don Felix points out, is dangerous because all the blossoms of an orange tree will fall off, and a child born during a lunar eclipse will miss a finger, the nose, a toe, or will have a harelip. The sun can also cause havoc and during a long solar eclipse the stones from the cooking place and the steam-house can come alive.

\textit{The relation between agriculture, food and gender}

What these stories do not explain – but what connects them – is the strong relationship that exists among the moon, food production, and the role of men. This becomes clear when looking at maize growing and how this is regulated by the phases of the moon.\footnote{Arias (1991:152) mentions how in Papantla working the milpa is related to saint’s days, and thus on fixed dates.} We again turn to Pedro:

A new moon is not the time for sowing maize. Eight days after a new moon you can sow. It is better to do this eight days before a new moon, with a waning moon. You can also not cut a tree during a new moon; this has to be done always with the waxing moon. You can plant coffee with a new moon, so it strikes root; pruning is also better with a new moon. After five months it is time to fold the maize stem halfway (doblar), with the waning moon, eight days before the new moon. (Pedro Ramos 1989)

Most Nanacatecos follow this pattern of maize growing. They carefully calculate the appropriate moon cycle dates for their work, but are pragmatic enough to use other days as well when circumstances interfere (chapter 3).

But how can a male moon and a man work together to make maize? For this it is necessary to look at the earth as a connection to the moon and the male. We imagine that the moon, husband or lover of all women, is a fertility symbol paired to the female. I propose that the earth is such a fertility symbol for the male. The earth can be female as well as male (Braakhuis 1990; Ichon 1973:146; Lammel and Nemes 1992:191). When considering the fertility of men, we have to assume that it is in connection with the earth as a female that a man can produce a maize child (see Braakhuis 1990:128; Ichon 1973:73-93; Govers 1992 for more details). This also suggests a pairing of the female earth and the male moon. In the Nanacateco origin story the fertility of the earth remains unexplained.
The origin stories highlight agriculture and the preparation of food by paying attention to the most basic food of tortillas and salsa, what people eat daily with other ingredients or as a last resort when nothing else is available. The stories thus reflect that men work in agriculture (or work the female earth under certain conditions of the moon), while women play a principal role in the preparation of food. The gender division of labour as well as food seems to be a crucial issue (Govers 1994, 1997) to which I return in chapter 7.

People only have a fragmented knowledge about the origin of the world, as Ichon also noted. What remains is considered central to living and livelihood: maize growing and daily food – despite the diversification of livelihood into the city. But to reconstruct the ‘grand narrative’ of even these domains other sources are necessary, and even then the picture is incomplete. Such crucial aspects such as the fertility of the earth and that of women are not explained. Water, another central element, does not even have an origin story but is linked to the origin of human settlement, including Nanacatlán (see chapter 4). As we see later the Patron of water is easily insulted and the main cause of susto. A complete picture has not arisen – if ever one existed. But the origin stories that explain living and livelihood are only one element of the local worldview; the mythical beings with their capacity to protect or attack the village provide an important link between the supernatural world and the village.

**Mythical beings**

*Cuentos* and *historias* are neatly distinguished in other contexts, but when it comes to the supernatural they can overlap as is the case for local stories about mythical beings in Nanacatlán. Such stories are especially pervasive because they relate personal or ancestral experience to the supernatural and social world. The mythical beings in such stories often affect the community as a whole in a positive or negative way. The latter is especially true for the Hojs-Kaxi (Squash-Head), a frequent topic of local talks in 1989. When people wake up at the dim light of dawn, children can feel a bit scared, and when grown-ups mention some strange noises they heard at night, the Hojs-Kaxi easily pops up in stories. The noise is said to have been made by he who has come to the village to cast a spell over it by moving through the village on one leg, after leaving his left bottom leg at the entrance to the village (see map 3 number 9), following the route of the processions and ending inside the church. It is said that he is sent by brujos from neighbouring villages that envy the prosperity and good life of Nanacatlán. Don Gustavo knows about his presence in detail.

**The Hojs-Kaxi of Zitlala**

We also have what I will tell as a story (*cuento*), but which is also reality. Various surrounding villages wanted to extinguish Nanacatlán. There is a village called Zitlala, about 1½ hours away, and in those days all the people there were very envious. And
when this happened, the *brujos* in those days – it was in 1912 – would start to work, to bewitch this village. There were very good *brujos* in Zitlala, and in Nanacatlán as well. They would bewitch each other. In Nanacatlán they never thought they would come from Zitlala. But in those days they came to do evil to the village by sending an evil being to encircle the village, dancing and beating his *jícara* (dried squash). They call him Squash Head [*Cabeza de Jícara*, in Totonac *Hojs-Kaxi*]. At the boundary between Zitlala and Nanacatlán, he would leave his left leg behind to be able to enter the village and when he had entered he would do everything in reverse. He would change his clothes to wear everything inside out, his shirt, his [traditional] trousers (*calzón*) as they all wore in those days. He would beat and beat his *jícara* and dance backwards. He would circle the village on all the streets, from the four corners [the route of the processions].

In those days there were also village authorities like today and a *Hojs-Kaxi* would also bewitch the authorities. First he would go to the house of the mayor, then councillors, the agent, and the judge. When he finished with all the authorities he would go to church. On entering the church he would leave his *jícara* outside at the door and would only go to the altar. Who knows what he was up to? When he was finished with praying or dancing, he would walk backwards, and talk to his *jícara* “Let’s go, we did what we came for, we are ready”. And he would continue walking backwards, backwards until he was outside the churchyard. He turned around and went back to the village border to pick up his leg and return home.

The next day everybody was talking about it, because many people had heard him. “Did you hear him last night?” “Yes, I heard it, who knows what it is?” The people who had survived his visits started to meet. “What do you think? Let us spy on him, and catch him, and see what we can do, we have to spy on him when he comes next time”. They already knew he did not come every day, but only on Tuesdays and Fridays. They decided to watch him and some of them hid in the church behind the large statues. They saw what he was doing and also recognised him as someone from Zitlala. The next Friday they decided to grab him, because now they knew he was a person, and not a *mal aire* or something like that. When the *Hojs-Kaxi* was in the church they tied up his *jícara*; when he came out of church and was trying and trying to lift up his *jícara* they managed to grab him. They tied him and put him in jail. In those days though the village authorities did not have the power to punish and they decided to send him to Zapotitlán, to the municipality. There they punished and questioned him and found out he was only a servant. They asked for the master’s name and decided to call him in. They released the servant, but took his *jícara* and his leg. He was so weakened, because he was bad and they had won, that he only managed to go back to the village border to die. His fellow villagers from Zitlala came to pick him up. His master became frightened and did not want to come anymore. This is what my grandfather, the father of my jefe, told me, exactly as I am recording it at this moment. (Gustavo Ramos 1989)

The father of don Gustavo, don Miguel, told me that Nanacatlán survived the *Hojs-Kaxi* visits because the people turned to God to ask for protection, and not to *brujos*, who used to be the counsellors. Most Nanacatecos, however, have a strong belief
in the power of brujos to either summon or avert evil and they all agree that the Hojs-Kaxi exists and also comes from Hueytlalpan. As don Felix told me, in addition to the male ones from other villages who threaten the village, there is also a female Hojs-Kaxi:

A boy and girl were just married. He did not know that she went out as a Hojs-Kaxi. His parents did not want him to register the wedding “because she will not stay with you at night, she will visit many villages”. The boy had wanted to marry her anyhow. They loved each other very much. One night when the boy was fast asleep, the woman caressed him, his head, hands, hair, and body and walked around him. He was also from Hueytlalpan. The parents of the boy were awake and were watching what she was doing. The girl went to the village boundary to beat her jícara. The parents woke up their son but he went back to sleep again. This happened for three days, and the parents told their son to go to sleep early so he could see what was happening. When the girl started to caress him, he pretended to sleep by snoring, and she believed it. The parents accompanied their son and at the border of Hueytlalpan with Nanacatlán, they heard the voice of the Hojs-Kaxi. At the border there is a chapel and a cross and there lay her right leg. How did she do that, remove her leg? Her father-in-law, mother-in-law, and husband saw her leg and took it to the village and put ashes on the knee, right where it had been amputated. The woman was playing here in the church and did not know what they were doing. She came home crying, with one leg hurting awfully. “Why did you follow me?” “My father and mother did not want me to marry you”. “Where is my leg? It is not your fault, I cannot help it either.” He showed her the leg full of ashes. She died that afternoon. (Felix Ramos 1989)

Nanacatecos distinguish between the male Hojs-Kaxi who is a threat to the village, and the female Hojs-Kaxi who is a threat to her husband and his family. In this virilocal community, a woman comes to live with her affines. This means that a stranger is becoming not only part of the family but also comes to live with them. Any stranger is a potential threat, the more so when they are a member of the household and can thus more easily do harm. The same way people from neighbouring villages are a potential threat because they are familiar with the village and know its layout, the route of the processions, and where the authorities live. Men who do not belong to the village and women who do not belong to the family are a potential danger, the more so when they are familiar with the village or the household.

Looking at the meaning of removing a leg can elucidate the kind of danger that a Hojs-Kaxi represents. This amputation may point at the real danger of a Hojs-Kaxi because though Nanacatecos do not mention it, elsewhere it has been related to fertility and castration (Galinier 1984:436-437) and the fear of cannibalism by affines (Overing 1986). Both explanations have a point here. The male Hojs-Kaxi threatens the survival of the village and its inhabitants, which could be interpreted as a loss of procreation. The female Hojs-Kaxi is feared for her presence at home and her potential threat to procreation, for which she is indispensable.

During my first visit such stories were frequently told, but in 1994 and 1996
nobody mentioned them anymore. At the end of the nineties the Hojs-Kaxi was back again. It was probably not necessary for him to damage the village, when Nanacatecos were so busy doing that themselves.

There are also other mythical cum human beings like the Stantlawa and the Tipskgoyat, who are persons who have learned to protect. They are from the village and are protectors of the village and its people. Knowledge about them has become scarce. Don Felix could explain more about them than most people, because he is from a family who can turn into one of them.

The Stantlawa is a person who goes out at night and flies into the sky. It goes up into the sky and when it is a woman you can see her long hair; when it is a man you can see it by his silhouette. They come out where the ravine is near the river where the singing stone is. Close to the cafetal of don Elios there is a large well that runs to the river. My mother told me that Bruno Ramos and his people were working, and it became late and his companions were asleep. He went to warm himself at the fire they had made and began to take out some fire; it stayed like fire, glowing, and he felt like flying and then he flew to where the strong thunder reaches. They [the Stantlawa] are the ones who help us, who guard us. When the stones want to revive [see below], they take care they do not walk about. When snakes want to appear, they stop them.

Also the Tipskgoyat are companions, persons, and in every village we have them. When they come home in the morning they put themselves very exhausted into the fire. An animal wanted to come out of the well, where the well water comes into the river; I think it is Patron of the well. They [the Tipskgoyat] came together and caught him.

And much earlier, the mother of my grandmother, Carmen Juárez, was also one of those who take care of us. I understand these things, because she was like my grandmother, the mother of Josepha Perez. And it is true that when she died, she woke up straight away and returned to the sky. (Felix Ramos 1994)

People do not know a lot about the Stantlawa and Tipskgoyat anymore, except that they were kind. They no longer exist; it is something from the past. Some villagers say this is because nobody teaches them to become one anymore. But according to don Felix people are born as Stantlawa or Tipskgoyat, it is not a matter of teaching. They have a lot of hair when they are born, that is how you recognize them. Pedro thinks that they may still exist but are hiding now, and that even the persons themselves might not know anymore that they have the power.

The Stantlawa is of minor importance, but the Tipskgoyat is defender of the village, of humanity. With a long solar eclipse all the stones that are heated [by human beings when they are cooking or taking a steambath] can come alive, the temazcal, tenamazte, comal. The Tipskgoyat defends us from them. During a solar eclipse everybody would go to church and extinguish any fire or candle, at home or in the church. When there would be light, the stones would revive quickly. (Pedro Ramos 1998)
Don Felix contrasts them to the *Hojs-Kaxi* and his companion, the dwarf.

They differ from the *Hojs-Kaxi*, who is bad, like the dwarves. Really, there used to be a lot of them [Tipskgoyat and Stantlawa], although they said they were opossums, but that is not true, they are persons; just like the *Hojs-Kaxi* is a person who could be jailed. You could hear him by the sound of his *jicara*. First on the mountain, then coming down, after that entering the village, he took the same route as the processions, the streets and the four corners. He entered the church and left his *jicara* on a large stone at the church door. It was a man from Hueytalpan. The *taksgoyut* (dwarf) also started dancing, and accompanied the *Hojs-Kaxi*, who danced and played the drum. (Felix Ramos 1994)

The opossum (*tlacuache*), owl, and *tecolote* (type of owl) are alike, according to Pedro, because they turn into dwarves that can play tricks with the human soul (*listakna*). Irene did not like to go to the bathroom at night, because of the dwarves.

My grandfather went to the bathroom, he was ill and the dwarves took him, and he saw a beautiful road. The next morning we did not find him in bed. Don Miguel brought him back, he lived outside the village those days, and he had found him close to a gully. Grandfather told us. (Irene Castañeda 1994)

The Patron Saint is also very valuable. Santiago is so powerful that people from other villages come to ask his protection, like the dancers from Xochtitlan who come all the way to Nanacatlán before they start their performance during the village feast in Tuxtla. Huitzilan also has Santiago as Patron Saint, and according to don Felix their problems started when his statue disappeared, which offended the saint. Santiago also protects against attacks by people from neighbouring villages. Don Gustavo knows from his son-in-law how Santiago came to the rescue.

Four men from Tuxtla wanted to kill a couple of men from Zapotitlán but they were not at home. The people from Zapotitlán went to Tuxtla; there was also a Nanacateco present, but they also found nobody. One night the men from Tuxtla decided to return to Zapotitlán. When they came to the border with Nanacatlán, they saw a man on a white horse carrying a lance. They saw Santiago from the village here. They could not continue because the road was blocked with rocks. They searched for the road, but it was blocked.

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12 Don Felix links stories about evil or things that go wrong to one of the new religious minorities. He is among the most fervent opposers of Protestantism. Since conversion to Protestantism he suddenly became a Catholic brujo and lost much if not all of his authority among Protestant Nanacatecos.

13 Ichon mentions the *Taqsjoyut*, who shares many characteristics with the *Tipskgoyat* (not with the *Taskgoyut*). The *Taqsjoyut* is Patron of Fire, under the rule of Saint John-Aktsini and associated with the Siren, Patron of the sea. The Siren has left the sea and goes from village to village to turn wells into the sea. The *Taqsjoyut* stops her. He can be seen as a light when he flies in the sky. Each village has some as protection. Two other main manifestations of *Taqsjoyut* are as Patron of the *temazcal* and *tenamaztle* (1973, especially 134-36 and 150-51). The word *Tipskgoyat* refers to illuminate (*skoy* or *makskoy* in Totonac), and is comparable to the translation of brujo by Aschmann (1983:116) as *skoyuna* and *skoyayduana*, which resembles the Nanacateco *skuwand* (could have been written *skohuanad*) for brujo.
The next day someone from Tuxtla went to Nanacatlan and the road was normal again. There was nothing, because of Santiago. The four men, three from Zapotitlán and one from Nanacatlan, went to Tuxtla and killed the men. I know this story because the grandfather of Marco was present... Marco who is now married to Odilia [don Gustavo’s daughter]. It must have happened in 1948. This is reality, it was about politics. (Gustavo Ramos 1989)

Not all mythical beings are considered to be ambivalent; some are outright good, others bad. Only brujos have a two-sided quality: they can attack the village but as fellow-villagers they can be used to attack or defend against other villages. Village authorities face a double burden. They are extra vulnerable to attacks but nevertheless expected to take the lead in defending the village. In the past, village authorities and brujos were the same persons and were thus able to defend the village against supernatural attacks. It is interesting to see that the ambivalence of brujos is expressed by their ability to turn into a good or bad being: they can become a Hojs-Kaxi but also a Stantlawa and Tipsgoyat. Such ambivalence of brujos is also apparent in their capacity to undo sorcery and heal as well as to inflict sorcery and cause sickness, as we see below. Though both mythical beings and origin stories are important explanatory aspects of the local worldview, they turn out to be less central to morality than ideas about self in relation to sickness.

Conceptions of the self: kuxta and listakna

Totonacs follow a general Meso-American pattern of tonalism (Ichon 1973:206-207; cf. Gossen 1994) in that they think of their selves as consisting of two souls: an animal-soul (kuxta) and a spirit-soul (listakna). The kuxta is the soul of an animal (or a number of animals) to which one is closely related, or with which one is identified.14 When they translate kuxta, literally ‘insect’ or animal in general, into Spanish, villagers speak of dobles, or ‘doubles’, and thus express the fact that it is a person’s co-spirit or co-essence. The listakna (Spanish: anima or espíritu) is the spirit-soul that exists before a person is born and lives on after a person has died, and it is closely related to the dueños or Patrons. Stakna means ‘life’ or ‘awake’ in Totonac and refers to “that what makes the body live and grow” (Ichon 1973:175). This dual nature of the self, consisting of kuxta and listakna, lies at the heart of local morality and identity (cf. Watanabe 1992; Sandstrom 1991:229-260). The well-being of humans and the community at large depends on how people ‘manage’ their souls in their daily lives. Humans should try to find a balance between their body and souls through their relations with the animals that share their kuxta and the dueños who communicate with people’s listakna. Upsetting these relations will bring trouble, misfortune, or worse.

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14 Watanabe (1992:87) notes that among the Maya of Santiago Chimaltenango the spirit double does not take the form of animals or natural phenomena anymore, but usually refers to a guardian angel or saint.
Tonalism or the belief in animal-souls links individuals in a very direct way to the natural world. People have several *kuxta* or *dobles*: some say that there are seven, and others count as many as twelve animal-souls. These souls are all different types of animals and they are all specific to each person. People however, never know for sure which animal is their *doble*: in dreams one may see his or her (type of) animal [species], but not the specimen.

Irene thinks that her first animal is a bird, maybe an eagle or a sparrow, because she often dreams that she is flying. Her father thinks that he has the soul of a deer. Pedro decided that he must be an armadillo, a badger, or maybe also a deer because he often dreams that dogs are hunting him and that arms are pointing at him. But one never can be sure which animal it is and therefore one has to be cautious and avoid hurting or killing an animal that is a possible *doble*. Like Irene says: “The doubles of Nanacatlán live high on the mountain above Zogonzotla (see map 1.3 number 11) and therefore villagers never should go hunting at that place because of the risk that they may kill a fellow villager. If your primary double dies, you die as well; if something happens to your other doubles, you get ill”. (Irene Castañeda 1989)

The existence of animal souls means that people have to take care not to kill any animals, not even dangerous ones like poisonous snakes. Snakes used to be quite numerous in the fields and mountains and people could easily run the risk of being bitten and poisoned. In many stories, these snakes appear as anthropomorphic beings that attack humans. Irene told me:

When seeing an injured snake, one has to cure it. Once my grandfather kicked a snake away and it landed between the thorns and got killed. Later, in his dream, an old man appeared to him who told him that he would not have had to die yet if he had not ran the snake into the thorns.

Irene’s grandmother added: “Once they killed a snake on the path and shortly after that a boy died. His stomach started swelling. It was his first *doble*”. Curing animals means not only curing people, but it can also bring you good fortune, as she continued:

A man from San Miguel called Pedro saw a snake that someone had tried to kill, but it was still alive. When the man saw the snake he took pity and covered it. He took bark from the *chaca* tree, *tušum* in Tototonac. The snake was in three pieces and he covered the wounds. He was not afraid, it was probably his destiny. The man went to buy maize in Xochitlan de Pinos Juárez and when he came back he saw a young man of about 14 years, whistling, but he did not know who he was. The young man said: “That you only arrive now. I have been waiting for a while, because my father told me to bring you along, because you cured me”. Pedro thus knew it was the snake, which took him home to a cave that looked like a house. “My father wants to give you something, but you must
not accept it because you will turn into an animal. Do you know what you have to do? I’d better tell you because I am glad that you have cured me. You have to ask for a ring, a golden ring. You have to take the last ring that is shown because it will give you a lot of money.” And Pedro became very rich. (Angelina Cristobal 1989)\(^{15}\)

According to Don Felix, a deer is the most important primary doble – or as he calls it, the companion of a human being – and therefore it is a mortal sin to kill or eat it because that equals cannibalism.\(^{16}\) Don Felix is seen as someone who has extensive knowledge about animal-souls because he, like his grandmother, belongs to the few people who have the power to change into their kuxta and become an animal. Such a capacity, called nahualism, represents shamanic power.\(^{17}\) It brings special talents and often also the legitimacy of leadership. Such bodily transformation (sometimes expressed as ‘changing clothes’) is a quite common phenomenon; the body makes the difference, but only in appearance, because the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ is formally identical in all species. In this perspective, bodies are not given but continuously made. Shamans derive their power from being able to transform into non-humans without losing their human condition, while other humans in a supernatural encounter pass over to the other side because they die or remain the spirit or animal they transformed into (Viveiros 2002).\(^{18}\) The body is thus a symbol for the relationship with the natural and supernatural environment, and acts as a moral reminder (cf. Bowie 2000:38-69). People who are not nahuals themselves can sometimes involuntarily turn into their animal double, as Don Felix reluctantly explained:

Some say that the kuxta is like an animal, for instance a dove, and some say we have twelve of them. Who commits many sins, starts coming out like a pig. They say here that once, but already a long time ago, a woman liked to ‘talk’ to the priest [having sexual relations with him]. They say that he took her kuxta and that because of that she fell ill, changed, and looked like a horse, the old woman (la nanita). (Felix Ramos 1994)

Though both the animal- and the spirit-soul reside in the heart, the spirit-soul also appears elsewhere in the body. The most important manifestation of the listakna is

\(^{15}\) This seems like a short version of El anillo de Tlalocan (Reyes García and Christensen 1990:87-101). As Angelina Cristobal is Nahua (from Huitzilan) it is not surprising she told a Nahua story, but other villagers did so as well because there is extensive contact through inter-marriage, migration, and cooperation.

\(^{16}\) According to Ichon (1973:86) there is a taboo on eating deer because a deer is the deceased father of the Maize God.

\(^{17}\) According to Ichon tonalism no longer exists among the Totonac of the northern part of the Sierra, contrary to nahualism. Tonalism is existence of an animal-soul of each human being. Nahualism is the power to change from human into animal at night, a power only reserved for a few people called nahual. The two are often confused (Aguirre Beltran 1987a:106). Such shamanic power often underlies political legitimacy and leadership (Gossen 1996:533; Masferrer 1986b). Nahualism and tonalism are thus related because they concern the same animal (Signorini and Lupo 1989:103).

\(^{18}\) This is contrary to the European view where the soul is the marker of difference; Europeans in their encounters with Amerindians had to find out whether they possessed a soul, to be able to be human, while Amerindians had to establish whether the Europeans had a body, and thus were humans instead of spirits (Viveiros 2002:316).
in the throat where it pulses, or more precisely in the uvula which is similar to the heart. It also shows itself at the pulses, inside the elbow, at the ankles, and on the top of the head at the fontanel. These spots are important, particularly during purification ceremonies and healings. When one is dreaming, the listakna leaves the body: dreaming is what the soul experiences outside the body. Saint Joseph, says don Felix, is the principal or Patron of dreams. When one is awake, the spirit-soul can also leave the body, for instance when one is frightened by one of the dueños or during sexual intercourse. When this happens, people fall ill with susto, one of the most common health problems. Or people who know brujería (sorcery, T. skuwanan) might try to harm the soul. The moral code is that people have to behave well and perform the necessary rituals and offerings to ancestors, Patron-saints, and God and fulfil their obligations to the community, the church, and their fellow human beings. This way one does not have to be afraid of upsetting the dueños or the dead, or people, who may go to a sorcerer in revenge. What happens most often when people get susto is that when they walk carelessly they stumble and then swear; or when they go to the wells they spill water and thus upset the dueño of the earth or of the water. If this happens and the spirit has left the body, healing is necessary to bring the spirit back to the heart.

When people die, the animal-soul grasps the spirit-soul and forces it to leave the body for good. After the body has been buried, the spirit-soul will return to the house before departing to heaven (or to purgatory, as some say). Therefore, people should not return to their household immediately after a burial because the soul of the deceased might harm the souls of the living. Every year at Todos Santos the spirit-souls of the dead return to the earth and relatives should take good care of this returning soul because if it is not treated well, it can cause serious harm.

Not all Totonacs subscribe to the conception of the two souls. The most devout Catholics and Protestants claim to have one soul only, because they believe in one God. Lorenzo, a good Catholic and healer, denies that he and his wife Magdalena have animal-souls. They only have espíritu and are therefore better off. Lorenzo never had susto because as he says, he has fuerza (strength) and a clean heart. But he is well aware that many other villagers do have two souls and thinks they got it because of a lack of faith in one God.

Restoring the balance: healing, curanderos and brujos

The well-being of a person thus depends primarily on whether their body and souls are in balance. Illness and disease therefore, are signs that there is something wrong with their balance, and Nanacatecos have a whole repertoire at their disposal of

19 People contradict each other when explaining where exactly the soul resides. Some say the heart, while others point at the uvula – which is also the part of the body that has a central place in healing rituals as healers try to bring the soul back to it. According to don Felix it does not have a fixed place in the body. Emotions also reside in the heart and according to some people there is also a (third) emotion-soul.
ways to deal with that and restore balance. These range from simple home-made concoctions and offerings to traditional healing specialists, and today also modern medical services.\(^{20}\)

All people have some general knowledge of what to do with minor disorders, though some have more than others. If their knowledge is insufficient, there are a number of people who have special powers. Some can treat specific cases like bone fractures or lumbago, while others belong to the specialist group of *curanderos* who can treat one or more serious ailments. People talk freely\(^{21}\) about how they treat simple cases like *susto*, *mal aire*, and *mal de ojo*, or stomach problems themselves. The ways to cure them are handed down from mother to daughter – women being most knowledgeable in this domain – and it is to the women that household members turn first when they are not feeling well. In most cases, they can cure them by using herbal teas from plants they grow in their garden or with herbal medicines they purchase from specialists. Most women have an extensive knowledge of medicinal plants for making tea. While walking with someone in the fields or looking at a garden, women often casually remark on the use of certain plants for curing a great variety of diseases such as coughing, a common cold, diarrhoea, or skin infections (see annex 3).\(^{22}\)

If women are unsuccessful or feel unable to cure a disease, they will ask advice from more experienced women among their acquaintances. If that doesn’t work, they refer their family members to specialists: herbalists (who have a far greater expertise in medicinal plants), masseurs or masseuses (who use herbs mixed with *refino* to treat muscles, lumbago, and stomach problems), bonesetters, or midwives. The number of such healers and therapists and their specializations in a small village like Nanacatlán is amazing, and I sometimes wondered whether there was somebody in the village who was not able to treat some special ailment; in many cases they proved to be quite capable of making people better.

If nothing helps, people these days have a choice: they can go to the small public health centre in Zapotitlán, a government institution providing free care, or turn to one of the traditional healers (*curanderos*) or sorcerers (*brujos*) in the region.

The small health centre in Zapotitlán is not very popular. Medical interns work here during their year of obligatory practice in social medicine. Even though their service is officially free of charge, a small donation is often required and the prescribed medicines are not always free. This prevents the poorest villagers from

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\(^{20}\) I am concerned with the way villagers describe sickness, and not with objective indicators, and thus with illness and not disease (see Eisenberg 1977 for this distinction), but even more with local views on causes of illness. For a comparison elsewhere in the Sierra see e.g., Ichon (1973, especially 229-362); Signorini and Lupo (1989) for the Nahua; and Galinier (1984:431-482) for the Otomí.

\(^{21}\) Though only when they realized that I was already familiar with the subject.

\(^{22}\) Annex 3 provides a list of herbs and plants used in local medicine. While I had no problems in receiving information on illnesses, curing methods and the ways people make herbal teas, it was hardly possible to get to know the exact composition of ointments and herbal blends as most healers justifiably consider that knowledge secret.
going there as they cannot afford the bus trip to Zapotitlán or the medical costs. Other people are also a bit reluctant to go there: they feel that they are not being treated by a ‘real doctor’ but an apprentice who is replaced every year so that there is no chance of building up a relation of mutual trust over time. In fact, the doctors are inexperienced and often face rural life and the diseases of the countryside for the first time. Sometimes their diagnoses are incorrect which in simple cases leads to snickering among the patients, but can be fatal in serious cases. Moreover, they lack the knowledge of ‘common’ health problems like susto, mal de ojo, mal aire, or cuajo – a frequent stomach problem among children. Mestizos and some of the rich Totonac villagers prefer to see private doctors in Zapotitlán or travel to the general hospital in Zacapoaxtla, and most of the women from these classes go there when they deliver a baby.

But in the field of health and well-being, there is an obvious traditional category of people who have a special position in the region. These ‘general healers’ or curanderos are more gifted and powerful than the traditional specialists. People generally turn to them when they are really in trouble or when everything else has failed. Their power inspires respect and awe, as well as fear; if someone is powerful enough to cure the most serious and life-threatening illnesses, then he or she could also use that power to harm people. Although people distinguish between the ‘good healer’ (curandero or macuchina in Totonac which means medico) and the ‘dangerous sorcerer’ (brujo), it is often hard to follow this distinction because even ‘genuine’ healers from time to time are accused of sorcery or become the targets of local gossip. In Totonac, a skuwana (brujo) can be either good (skuwana namakgtayayan or skuwana xatlan), translated as brujo bueno, or bad (skuwana nixatlan or skuwana nitlanxtayat), a brujo malo.\(^{23}\) This coincides with the distinction between shaman and sorcerer/witch. Though both have special powers, the good skuwana uses them for protection and to undo sorcery, while the bad skuwana bewitches and harms people. Again, this distinction is not clear because a skuwana has the potential to do both. In general people use the term curandero when they refer to a healer, the more so when they visit one, because nobody will readily admit to consulting a brujo.

As curanderos occupy a central position in the maintenance and restoration of balance between body and the souls and the well-being of villagers, I briefly introduce five of them before I discuss the illnesses which stem from imbalance and misconduct: doña Celia Manzano, jefa (leader) of the women; don Felix, the informal village leader or jefe; don Lorenzo, a self-made healer; don Miguel, one of the

\(^{23}\) Makgtayaya means faenero (communal labourer) or ayudante (helper, assistant). Tlan means good, xatlan better and nitlan bad. Nitlanxtayat means ‘not good character’ as also the devil is called in Totonac, or akskawini (akskawity is to mislead, to deceive), or by the Spanish names diablo, el malo (the bad), el maligno (the evil). Dow (2005a:3) calls the labelling of shamans (native priests) as brujos, sorcerers by the Spanish an act of linguistic imperialism. It is, however, clear that they did not manage to impose this translation in its unambiguous evil meaning. Nanacatecos clearly consider brujos to be ambiguous: shamans and sorcerers. For an overview of shamanism in Central and North Mexico see Dow (1999).
early Protestant converts and a renowned healer; and doña Juana who cures the often ignominious sexual and reproductive disorders.

Until her death in 1990, Celia Manzano (*1917), a woman from a well-off mestizo family and the mother of Don Camilo, was seen as the most prominent woman (jefa) in Nanacatlan. Although a Catholic, she was never very active in church. Compared to her Totonac contemporaries she was well-educated and well-connected through compadrazgo ties. She stood out as a very special herbalist because she was the only person in the whole region able to prepare blends and ointments of a professional standard to cure a wide range of health problems. Even curanderos from faraway places would come to her to buy them at the generally low prices she asked. She learned to make the concoctions and ointments from her grandparents and knew a lot about the village and its people, as well as about health and illness. Although she also was familiar with healing rituals through her frequent contacts with other curanderos she did not perform those rituals herself. Before she suffered from gout which impeded her movements seriously, she used to go and visit people and bring them food – especially those families working for her husband and later her son, and the very poor.

As the most important shaman Félix Ramos (*1920) is called the jefe of the men.24 When he was younger he also worked as a peon in seasonal agricultural labour as far away as the lowlands of Veracruz. He owns two hectares of milpa and one of coffee land. Unlike many of his Totonac contemporaries he is literate. He particularly treats severe cases of susto, mal aire, and fertility problems and is able to undo sorcery. He inherited his knowledge from his ancestors who are known as healers, brujos, and midwives; they are said to have been nahuales as well, able to change at will into animals or mythical beings during the night. Don Felix uses a book for his prayers, at the house altar or for curing Lavalle Nacional para uso del Catolico Mexicano, compuesto por el presbito D. Julian G. Villalan (Mexico City, 1905). He also prays by himself and reads the bible. Nanacatecos living in Mexico City and people from Huitzilan offered him money to perform brujería, but he does not want to compromise himself. People from the whole region come to him for healing, especially from Huitzilan. Because of his knowledge, people often seek his advice; at the same time he has also a reputation of a troublemaker who can stir up villagers. He was accused of being a brujo but never lost his influential position in the village.

Miguel Ramos (*1903) heals susto, mal aire and mal de ojo, but is especially known to cure fertility problems. He works at home and is mostly visited by people from Ixtepec, including those who have migrated to Puebla. He reads the bible a lot and prays to God in all his healings. He was an itinerant butcher and trader who travelled through the Sierra with a few small cattle. He owns half a hectare of milpa and of coffee land, but

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24 As we have seen in earlier chapters he is a carpenter famous for carving sacred objects for the whole region, was captain of two dances and had been active in religious and civil cargos.
used to own more land which he gradually sold. When he was working with Pedro Aschmann he converted to Protestantism, but is not a member of any church. Given his age, he must have been one of the few literate Totonacs when he was younger. He considers himself to be well protected against misfortune and sickness because he reads and knows the bible; as he already finished it twice, he knows for sure that he is saved. He was never active in religious cargos, but was in the civil ones and knows a lot about village history and local stories. He has become too old for an active social life. He taught his children and grandchildren the stories he knew, but they do not seem to be interested to take over his healing. He has an honourable position as eldest villager.

Lorenzo Velázquez (*1943) is mostly active in the surrounding villages especially in Tuxtla, and even prefers not to heal in Nanacatlán anymore; he makes house-calls instead of receiving people at his home. He learned most of his knowledge from attending rituals and reading texts he picked up from others; this made him a specialist in curing sustos though he also cures other illnesses. His wife inherited one hectare of land that they use as milpa and to grow chillies and less than a quarter hectare of coffee land. Since the early 1990s his sons have taken over working the land. He is literate – his father was a teacher – and uses prayers and is the only one praying novenas (nine evenings of prayers after someone dies) when asked to do so. Don Lorenzo also uses the book of Villalan, as well as La Santa Cruz de Caravaca. Nuevo Tesoro de Oraciones (Mexico City, 1963). He has difficulty explaining the specific causes of sickness and has no thorough knowledge of rituals and stories, except the common ones most Nanacatecos know about. He is often openly accused of brujería unlike other healers who are sometimes the object of surreptitious rumours. Having twins, a sign that parents have ominous powers, has added to the distrust. Because of these accusations he is hardly active in the church anymore; he used to be a religious cargo holder but now has become a bit marginalized. His sons seem to have taken his place as they have been part of the dance troupe of the Santigueros for years; one even plays the role of Santiago in the dance. Lately another son has become interested in learning to heal. Despite his healing powers don Lorenzo is marginal and usually operates outside the village.

The herbalist Juana Figueroa (*1947) treats people with reproductive and sexual problems. Women, and also men secretly visit her and she only reluctantly talks about her healing practices. She is the only one left, because the other women who taught her the healing have died in the meantime. Two of them were doña Celia and the midwife Juana Ramos who curaban para las familias (cured for the families), as she calls this healing. She learned how to treat painful, excessive, or postponed menstruation, fertility problems, impotence, problems with ovaries and the womb, and contraception, although she does not always know what causes these problems. Doña Juana went to an INI training course in Zacapoaxtla once, where they call healers doctores indígenas, and thus got used to explaining the non-controversial aspects of her work, but became suspicious when people started probing into her knowledge. She told the INI staff she helps and cures women but did not want to tell them that she also performs abortions – although she does.
Even though people clearly distinguish between the various types of healers and their different backgrounds, they tend to freely shop around in this world of healing. For simple medical problems they use herbal teas from the leaves or roots of a specific plant which they prepare themselves. If they need stronger medicine, herbalists and other specialists can provide more complicated mixtures of plants and herbs, often in an alcohol suspension. If it is immediately obvious that they are unable to cure the complaints themselves, they turn to others such as a doctor, bonesetter, midwife, or herbalist. For fractures, vaccinations, complications, and prolonged bad health people who can afford it go straightaway to a doctor or medical specialist and bypass curanderos even if they suggest that they can be of help. But when people suffer from stomach, gastric and intestine complaints, or sustained high fever, some might go to a healer and others directly to a medical doctor, and still others might go to both. For muscular and spinal aches, stiffness, or lumbago people ask a masseur to come by. Women with menstrual, vaginal, uterine, or menopausal complaints, or an unwanted pregnancy, will consult healers specializing in women’s diseases; only if these complaints persist will they go see a doctor or a gynaecologist. As for many other medical ailments, when they are in doubt, they will go to both healers and doctors. In cases of severe susto, mal aire, mal de ojo, cuajo, depression, misfortune or an unidentified or incurable health problem, people know that only a curandero and as a last resort a brujo can be of any help.

Only a few, don Gualo among them, are heavily opposed to traditional healing because they consider it dangerous and possibly lethal. He opposes brujos, as he calls all healers, because they turn their knowledge into merchandise and sell worthless herbs, but they take advantage of people. Don Gualo is sure that all this will change when there is more official medical care in the village. As a mestizo he does not understand the Totonac views on sickness, body, and souls that are outside the reach of modern medicine, although he knows some of these views. He uses herbs himself and others often mention him as someone who used to be a successful curer of snake bites. Some of the changes he favours, like vaccinations and the local procurement of medicines and injections have become common practice in Nanacatlán. In 1998, most women under 40 have been trained in hygiene and nutrition programmes; boiling drinking water for instance, is normal to them – causing a sharp decline in the incidence of infantile diarrhoea. Many older people do not like the taste of boiled water and continue their old habits.

But even if people today have grown used to the habit of ‘shopping around for medical services’, the majority of Nanacatecos still relate most problems in wellbeing and health to problematic relations with the supernatural world, and they classify them – apart from the already mentioned susto, mal aire, mal de ojo, and cuajo – as enojo (anger), saccar piedras (named after its cure of removing material objects planted in the body by a brujo), or brujería (witchcraft and sorcery). In the next section I discuss these ‘disturbances’ as well as a number of illnesses related to sexuality and reproduction.
Sickness and healing

When someone is healthy it means that body and souls are in harmony; to achieve this one has to be in harmony with the social, natural, and supernatural worlds. Only then does the spirit-soul stay inside the body and the animal-soul not get hurt or upset. Some people are more likely to fall ill than others: those born during *luna recia* (lit. strong moon) rarely fall ill, while those born during *luna tierna* (lit. delicate moon) often do. When someone has strength (*fuerza*) he or she is not only healthy, but also has the ability to protect the spirit-soul from being taken by Patrons, the dead, *brujos*, or other human beings. Even with such *fuerza* it is essential not to invite danger. Therefore people have to be careful to not upset the cosmic balance. The normal way to do so is by abiding the rules and following customs. Rituals and offerings are a necessary condition to maintain and restore harmonious relations. “In this sense all rituals are curings, formal gestures to re-establish equilibrium with the spirit world, with the avowed purpose of restoring balance and health to the community” (Sandstrom 1991:313). Healing and rituals then both aim at compensating for disequilibrium by taking away impediments – healing is often called cleaning (*limpia*). Humans – nature – supernature are in a reciprocal relationship and what follows are some of the most crucial disturbances of this reciprocity.

*Patrons causing susto*

*Susto* is a state of shock that can vary from mild to severe, due to the absence of the *listakna* (spirit-soul). When experiencing a frightful situation a person can become ill with *susto* and will develop a headache followed by an aching body, high fever, diminished appetite, and in severe cases complete loss of appetite (Rubel, O’Nell & Collado-Ardón 1984; Aramoni 1990:49-88). Just about anything can trigger *susto*: an attack by a dog, a sudden car, a falling rock, cold water, falling in the water, getting too close to the fire, shivering, saying something bad. Nanacatecos believe that an *espanto*, as they often call it, is caused by the Patrons of Water, Earth, Fire, Air, or Maize when they are or feel offended. In Totonac either *tlhawan* (moving, travelling) or *pikuan* (to be frightened) is used. Fear of a car or dog, or whatever caused the *susto*, is related to where it took place. *Susto* caused by the Water Patron is mentioned most often, which suggests a crucial symbol for human life (Romero 1999). When people cross a river or gully, wash, bath, go to the wells or water basins, it is easy to splash, spill, or soil the water and thus arouse the Patron’s anger. The illness is caused by the Patron who forces the *listakna* (spirit-soul) of the person who caused his anger to leave the body and stay behind. Don Miguel explained: “Knowledge of *sustos* is handed down by the ancestors, and is not just a *cuento*, but it tells you how to live. Doctors do not know about it, you don’t get cured by going to them”. People can willingly or unwillingly insult a Patron and should therefore take care of what they do. *Susto* is related to everyday life and chores and can happen everywhere: when people grind maize,
when they walk or work the land, fetch water, or cook. When children fall, as prevention against susto, people beat the spot while addressing the soul and calling it by the child’s name: “Get up [name], get up, you will not stay here, this is a place for walking”. When they are on their own and have fallen or have been scared by a dog, it helps when children themselves blow their nose, or go to urinate quickly. But one can also try and prevent susto for instance, by burying a clove of garlic near the well where one regularly goes.

Upon contracting susto it is not always easy to remember or know what its cause was, as susto can manifest itself long after the fact. But knowing it is necessary for the curing. Sometimes such knowledge comes through dreaming: when one for instance frequently dreams about water, one knows. When Irene once came back from the river, she developed a fever and went to get an injection at the medical centre in Zapotitlán. But when she did not she get better she realised that it must be a susto. She started thinking back, and concluded that she had water susto, though she herself had not been scared.

I walked with Pedro along the river and he gave me a piece of fruit that smelled bad. I said “How ugly”, but the water must have thought I was talking about it. I was getting very warm that day and that night I already had a fever and the next day my face was swollen. That is where the Patron of Water hit me. The Patron of Water was angry. Pedro went back to the river to get water, and to doña Celia to get her remedy. An aunt of mine did the curing. A couple of days later I was cured. (Irene Castañeda 1989)

When doña Celia was still alive, many people went to her to buy the medicine for curing susto. She used refino with what she calls the hierbas de espanto: wormwood (estafiate), savory (matanzi), avocado leaves, cloves of garlic, black pepper, clove, some tobacco, and nutmeg. After she died people went to doña Judith Bravo, who knows how to make the medicine. She does not perform the rituals, just like doña Celia, and that makes it safe to turn to her because she definitely is not a bruja. Other people know how to make a simple medicine. Water or earth from the place where it happened should be used, or added to the ready-made medicine, to drink and bath in it. When going to the spot where it happened it is vital not to speak to anybody on the way there and back. Especially upon returning the water should be handled with care, because it contains the spirit-soul, who will immediately leave again when handled carelessly. The most important and indispensable part of the curing is to ask the spirit-soul to come back, using the person’s name: “Irene, katat, katat, ni katamakogaxltkogat, kataspit” (Irene, come, come, don’t stay, return).

Another way of curing susto is by starting to paladear (literally sucking, cleaning the mouth), by applying garlic to the uvula, the body part through which the spirit-soul has left. When one has susto the uvula is slimy, it sticks, and that is why a person is unable to eat. When the uvula is hot, it is because the fright was by fire, when it is dry it is from the earth, and when very cold from water. Odilia (the
CHAPTER 5

granddaughter of don Miguel) cures with garlic on the uvula as she learned from her mother, doña Lucinda, who is Nahua. Her mother does this with the smoke of tobacco which she inhales until she feels dizzy, like a drunk. She blows the smoke over the top of her forefinger until it turns black, and than uses the finger to touch the uvula. With paladear the spirit-soul who has been hiding will come down. The person vomits. For less severe frights, like the ones caused by aire or a dog, this is usually enough. Otherwise additional curing is necessary, by taking an herbal bath using water or earth from the place where it happened and by applying refino to the parts the body where the spirit-soul can be noticed (throat, temples, pulses, ankles, neck, fontanel etc.). Doña Lucinda uses refino by taking a sip and than spitting it on the skull where the fontanel is and in the neck. Others rub it with their hands on the particular spot.

When a susto is more severe or does not go way through self-help, curing by a healer is necessary. Some use the method of paladear, but not the general healers I know. Don Miguel starts the curing and naming with “In the name of Jesus Christ...”. He prescribes a tea of savory during a week, three times a day, and then the patient should take a total of six baths of boiled water with savory, garlic and tobacco at 11 o’clock (though he can not say why it should be at that time), every third day. He does not drink refino himself, like most male healers do and is an exception with his views on Patrons as the sources of evil.

Sustos are caused by different spirits, which are also Patrons, but they are not from God but from the temptation. The Bible says that Jezebel [the devil] commands the world from the beginning; he is the enemy of Christ. When you fall, Christ comes to lift us up, to help us. Christ lifts you up, when you have faith in Him. That is how I cure, first with God our Lord, because I as a human being cannot do anything. When she does not feel well, I take my wife to the temazcal (steam house) in the name of God, and the fever leaves her. But only I, not everybody, do it like this. (Miguel Ramos 1998)

Don Felix feels the places where the heart beats (where one hears the listakna). When, for instance, the pulse is irregular it is water susto, when it beats irregular at the foot, it is earth susto.

Don Lorenzo has his own secret medicine of refino with a great number of herbs: ajo (garlic), canela (cinnamon), chichicastle (heartleaf nettle), clavo de comer (clove), coralillo (bloodberry), escobilla (vervain), espinosilla (Mexican false calico), estafiate (wormwood), hierba del aire (mountain saucerflower), laurel, mano de grillo (bloodleaf), matanzi (savory), mejorana (marjoram), mirto (baby sage), oregano, perejil (parsley), pimienta (allspice), salvia (skullcap), saúco (blue elder), toronjil (Mexican giant hyssop), yolispa (waxweed) (for botanic names see annex 5). He not only uses it for sustos, but for all kinds of other illnesses. He often visits his patients at night, between 3 and 4 o’clock, because it is important not to meet anybody on the way when one wants a good curing. He smokes tobacco, drinks refino and prays the rosary to be protected against evil on
his way in the dark. He always uses special prayers to accompany his cures interwoven with a number of Lord’s Prayers and Hail Mary’s.

When I go to cure water susto I carry water, but not always from where it occurred. Not when it happened too far away. I start with the praying and during the Misterios I call the name of the person. After the praying I run the body of the sick person with the water with minced tobacco, garlic, wormwood, and savory. After that I rub the person with my mixture of refino and herbs. Then I cover the body with a blanket and when the person starts sweating it is all right already, than the temperature goes down. For susto de tierra I do the first rubbing with earth and for susto de agua I do it with the herbs. With susto de aire and fuego I skip the first rubbing. Each of the sustos has their own prayer. I got them from someone from Tuxtla; I want to keep it away from the people here, because it is from another village. The people here do not know it. (Lorenzo Velázquez 1989)

Lorenzo is especially cautious in keeping his secrets from the other villagers because it is his way to make a living. Over the years I have had to continuously reassure him that I would not talk about his healing in the village, though he did not mind my publishing about it.

Sometimes a susto can even lead to death, for instance when the loss of the spirit-souls leads to permanent damage to the heart, but this rarely happens. One of the sustos I have not mentioned yet, that only men can contract, causes impotency and when not treated properly the patient easily dies. Susto of women causes ovary problems and women can die when it is not cured. Both sustos are cured by specialists who deal with all kinds of reproductive and sexual ailments, which I turn to now.

Sexuality and reproduction

Problems related to reproduction and sexuality are rarely talked about directly and should not be discussed between women and men, except between spouses and close relatives. There are enough stories, jokes, gossip, and veiled comments to compensate for this lack of openness. For reproductive problems, women visit a midwife, a specialised healer, or a doctor. In 1989 there were still four midwives, by 1998 only two were left. A younger woman was learning the job, but she had just begun and did not yet have any children herself. One of midwives is an aged woman, doña Rosa, the Baptist sister of don Felix. Like her deceased sister (doña Juana Ramos) she learned the trade from her mother who was also a midwife. Doña Rosa took an INI training course for midwives and learned everything about hygiene, nutrition, and taking care of mother and baby (see birth rituals, chapter 6). The second midwife in Nanacatlán, also called Juana, has a rather ambiguous reputation; some consider her to be a bruja. She attends to several women but is highly secretive about her profession and refused to take part in the INI midwives course. There are male teachers and she doesn’t want to talk about pregnancy and birth with men.
Doña Juana Figueroa is the stepmother of Irene and I met her every now and then when I accompanied Irene to visit her father. I therefore had the opportunity to get to know more about the secretive nature of her healing. Her most common healings are menstruation problems, either when they are too excessive or too late. Menstruation is excessive due to the female (hembra) movement of the moon, and is too late due to its male (macho) movement (its turn around the earth is male or female). The moon itself is male. Doña Juana is unable to explain more and thinks that people who know how to read know more about it, including the name (or Patron/saint) of the moon. When Irene consulted her about a pain she had, she told her that her womb was blocked and needed a cleaning with a tea from Mexican lippia (hoja dulce) and cinnamon. After a few meetings, doña Juana also wanted to talk about other aspects of her work as a healer, and she reluctantly admitted that she sometimes practiced abortion.

The women lose a lot of blood, that is why you have to do it before two months. You can not see it is a baby yet, at that time. The plant I use is called tapakghtawila and is very cold; it should not be used every month. Especially girls but also women come for an abortion. An abortion is very ugly; you can not walk a lot for three days, the fourth day it dries. Some women immediately clean themselves, others wait a week. (Juana Figueroa 1994)

Men also visit Juana (or other healers) for impotence, often caused by espanto de hombre. This susto is only whispered or gossiped about and occurs when a man experiences a sudden shock during intercourse if for instance, someone enters the room or turns on the light. This is extremely dangerous for the man (not for the woman though), because the stiffness of his penis turns inside the body which can easily cause death. A man is much more sensitive to such a susto when he has intercourse with someone who is not (yet) his wife, especially in adultery or during a rape. Doña Juana prescribes a tea of Mexican lippia with cinnamon, the same recipe she uses to cure women.

Constantino, a nephew of don Gualo, was said to have died of espanto de hombre and everybody was especially convinced this was true when his relatives returned without his body from the hospital in Zaxapoaxtla. Don Gualo did not want to tell me, but Lupe and Caro could fill me in, though their stories differ about why he got espanto.

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25 It is the first time I heard someone mention the word womb (matriz) without hesitation, because usually estomago is used for just about anything that it related to bodily parts and functions that are considered a shameful subject, like menstruation pains or diarrhoea.

26 Irene does not agree you can’t see it is a baby at two months, because she had a miscarriage once about that time. According to Juana it is not as real as with four to five months. She does not want to show the plant she uses to make the abortion tea.

27 Every healer has his own method and don Lorenzo uses frog (rana) in his recipe.
At the hospital they accidentally mistook the body of the nephew of don Gualo for that of another person. They already buried the nephew in a municipal grave together with others without a coffin and thus could not dig him up anymore. Genaro and the son of don Gualo\textsuperscript{28} found out when they went to pick up the body. The hospital offered to pay compensation of 10 million pesos, if they didn't go to a judge. But Genaro wanted to call in a judge, he is so political now. That is why the widow only got 4 million, because the judge pocketed the remainder. She would have been better off if she had arranged everything with the director of the hospital. Don Gualo is angry with her, because she had left her husband alone after she brought him to the hospital in Zacapoaxtla, he died alone. But she is angry with don Gualo because they let her go unaccompanied to Zacapoaxtla with a dying man. She stays with him now, but has to pay for everything, even though she is a widow with four children and don Gualo has enough money. She did not even cry when her husband died.

He died of \textit{espanto} when he was with another woman, I heard from don Gualo and from Magdalena. (Lupe Ortega 1994)

The wife of the deceased does not appear to be much affected by her husband’s death. But she also had another man, close to her home. She received 4 million for the disappeared body. There is no place now to burn candles, he was put in a municipal grave, together with others and could not be dug up anymore. His wife should have stayed with him in Zacapoaxtla, when he was so ill. He did not have another woman, but he harassed the women from Tuxtla who passed by. That is why the women did not like to go back to Tuxtla anymore. He took them up the mountain. I was always afraid when I had to get milk at his place and did not like to go to Tuxtla. He had cattle, from his mother, the sister of don Gualo; now his wife owns the cattle. (Caro Ramos 1994)

Impotence can also be caused by sorcery or when a man drinks tea of \textit{kangkatatuwan}. Women come to doña Juana to ask for this remedy when they suspect their husband of having an affair, but she again keeps the plant a secret.

Also women can have \textit{espanto} when they fall or are beaten by their husbands. “When they play [when they are having extramarital or premarital affairs] they can contract it”, doña Juana explains in a moralizing way. In women this causes \textit{inflamación o hecho de ovarios} (inflammation of the ovaries). This kind of \textit{susto} can be very dangerous and when doctors do not recognize it, the woman will die. Juana is able to cure it by hand, through massage.

Illicit sex is a highly popular theme in local gossip and is often connected to stories about health problems and misfortune as the outcome of adultery and other forms of breaking the moral codes. Children are more likely to be the victim of adults, as we see now.

\textsuperscript{28} Both are cousins of the deceased. Genaro is the son of don Alfonso, brother of don Gualo, and their sister's son is Constantino. Elios (husband of Lupe) is a cousin of don Gualo.
Mal de ojo

When children cry a lot and feel unhappy they may have the evil eye, which means their spirit-soul has wandered off with another person. Some people have strong eyes, and when they look at a baby or small child, its soul wants to follow that person. Or somebody sees a beautiful and well dressed child and wants to take it with her or him. The evil eye is a widespread phenomenon in Latin America and the Mediterranean and is commonly seen as an institutionalised expression of envy (Foster 1965b:33). Nanacatecos on the contrary, talk about it as caused by excessive love, the opposite of jealousy. Love is excessive because it interferes with the child’s attachment to the mother; due to the evil eye a child becomes very upset and starts crying so much that even the mother can’t comfort it. A person can cause the evil eye without wanting or intending to do so and especially women, well-known ones as well as passing hawkers and vendors (see also Cosminsky 1976; Sault 1990). Exposing a child to the outside world is thus a matter of care. There are ways to prevent the evil eye, especially by asking a person to touch and caress your child, as I was frequently asked to do, or by making a cross on the forehead. What also helps is to dress a baby in red clothes or a red cap, or to put a twig of fringed rue (ruta) underneath the pillow-case.

When her children contract the evil eye, Irene knows how to cure them. She rubs the child’s the body with a package of salt, alum, and 12 peppers (chiltepines) wrapped in paper, and afterwards throws it in the fire. The smoke from the package then reveals who has cast the evil eye. What remains is stored in a cold place. The child is taken to a cool place and the body is softly rubbed with an egg (in its shell). The egg is broken at the top, the egg white poured on a greenstick (hoja santa) with butter or oil and rosebuds, and spread out with another leaf of angel’s trumpet (floripundio). One leaf is stuck to the belly, the other to the back, and a cloth is wrapped around the body, where it sits for 12 hours. The child is put to bed and Irene places a cup with water, egg yolk, the 12 peppers, and on top of it open scissors and two Mexican elder (saüco) twigs as a cross at the head of the bed, until the child wakes up the first time. Afterwards everything is thrown away, except the eggshell which is put in a cool place.

Don Miguel also cures this way or with a chilpotle grande which he cuts open, takes the seeds out and fills with 12 chiltepines, salt and lime (cal) and wraps all of it in a piece of cloth. With this he cleans the body (by softly rubbing it) while saying “Come back, come back to your home, from where you are, from where they have taken you, come back”. Then he throws the chilpotle in the fire, until it gets brown

Cosminsky (1976) relates the evil eye to the restriction of women and Sault (1990) to the control of young women by elderly women. Sault suggests looking at the social relationships between the people involved in giving, receiving, and curing the evil eye. She sees a positive side to the evil eye because it affirms inter-generational social relations by younger women seeking advice and cure with elderly women. In Nanacatlan primarily women perform self-curing and often seek advice from other women. Social relationships are much more diffuse and relating fear of the evil eye to restriction of women or intergenerational contact between women seems too narrow a view.
and starts smelling strong; when it cools down it forms the shape of the person who caused the evil eye. Unlike others he does not put it in a cool place, but hangs it over the fireplace.

Mal aire

When children or grown ups suddenly start vomiting, it is likely they have been touched by malicious aire (T. nitlan ün or lakthawan ün), which means that the soul of a deceased has poisoned the spirit-soul, or that a brujo has used it. A serious mal aire causes a swollen stomach, swollen legs, and difficulty in speaking. To prevent children from getting mal aire, a clove of garlic is used to smear them or is attached to their clothes or at the side of their pillow. The cure is the same as with the evil eye, only when the pepper is burned it takes the form of an animal, and one thus knows it is mal aire and not the evil eye. It is also cured by rubbing refino with garlic on hands and head.

Don Felix once cured a man almost dying from mal aire. He used refino with valerian, camphor, garlic, wormwood, and savory every two hours for rubbing all the spots where the spirit-soul can be felt. As a drink he made vino Jerez (sherry) with nutmeg, and administered a teaspoon every two hours, to strengthen the heart. “And he truly woke up and lived another 15 years”. When a mal aire is caused by witchcraft he also uses refino with tobacco and kutupath to rub the swollen legs downwards so that the mal aire goes down.

Cuajo and empacho

Children are also prone to stomach problems. When a child stops eating tortilla (or throws it up), has diarrhoea, and a hard stomach full of gas, it suffers from cuajo (literally coagulation, stoppage). This happens when a child falls down hard. Finkler (1985:43) mentions the association of cuajo with intestinal dysfunction and loss of body symmetry with children. In the Sierra of Puebla it is often called caída de cuajo (Lupo 1998:241-248). Mothers with small children often know how to cure it, with help. One person has to lift up the child, the other has to massage the stomach; this should be repeated every three days a total of five times. Odilia lays her children on their belly in her lap with their legs up. When the feet are not on equal height, it means they have cuajo. She massages their back with the side of her hand, up and down the spine, and takes each vertebra between her fingers until they snap. Don Miguel says the fall causes the stomach to move to the side, instead of being in the centre. He cures it by massage, with oil or a pomade, each side of the stomach from left to right and from up to down.

Diarrhoea can also mean that a child has empacho, stomach problems due to eating too much or too hastily, causing indigestion. Odilia gives her children tea to drink, drawn of a kneaded dough of burnt tortilla, cookies, and bread, which is minced and then boiled in water the way coffee is made. She makes a wrap of hog
fat and carbonate in a green stick and attaches it to the stomach for the night with a piece of cloth. The next morning the leaves have dried up and the illness is cured.

The danger of provoking coraje

Not only the anger of supernatural beings but of human beings, can be dangerous. When people die of tumors, heart problems, or when they wither away it is possible they have died of anger or as Nanacatecos say coraje or enojo. Expressing such anger, or the state of anger, is also called muina, according to Galinier (1987:448) a local pronunciation of mohina (grudge), a frustration that originates from the inability to resolve a situation. Though it can be used to describe an illness, Nanacatecos mostly refer to coraje as the cause of death, when the deceased is known to have been subjected to anger or has been angry over a longer period of time. The person provoking the anger is blamed for the death. Coraje is often the result of emotional problems between husband and wife. Women are easily affected by their husband’s misbehaviour: when he is often angry with her, when he does not give her enough money, or has other women. Coraje also easily occurs when there are family problems, for instance, when people squabble over the division of inherited land. Slowly such a situation starts affecting the person. Especially sensitive women, and people who lose a dispute are likely victims. When Pedro’s mother died of cancer, his sister Tomasa told me her mother probably died of coraje. Her father used to drink a lot and had made life very difficult for her mother. Coraje also undermines a person’s strength and therefore makes them more susceptible to other illnesses. The new daughter-in-law of Magdalena and Lorenzo fainted three times when she was still living at home, and Lorenzo found out it was mal aire. This was provoked by coraje, because of the constant anger of her mother, who would often scold her children, for instance when there was not enough food (see also Finkler 1985:49).

Death by coraje can be interpreted in different ways and directed towards the most convenient problem.

Don Felix said that the death of don Gustavo (in 1994) was due to a dispute between him and the church over a piece of land. Don Gustavo claimed his land stretched as far as the church, while church documents, according to don Felix, show that the land belonging to the church includes half his house. Others related his death to the then ongoing fight between PRI and PRD followers. Don Gustavo’s sons, I found out later, had been furious with the active PRD members because they were convinced that those people had caused

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30 Tension between spouses resulting in health problems for women that they attribute to ‘anger’ is apparently a widespread phenomenon in rural Mexico. This may be due to economic difficulties, heavy drinking, and the shift to nuclear families which often leaves women to face the burdens of the household alone (Finkler 1985:40, 49, 61). We have seen in chapter 4 that many women in Nanacatlan have become more economically dependent since wage labour gained in importance and how their situation is affected by the willingness of husbands and children to pool income if she does not have an independent income.
the coraje their father died of. Their father was chairman of the local PRI committee and had been much aggrieved with the fierce and aggressive attacks on his party. When his sons were in the village for the funeral, they went to the house of one of the critics (Constantino, who appeared in the previous chapter) and started beating up some of the PRD activists.31

Saccar piedras

Nanacatecos distinguish between sorcery and saccar piedras (removing stones), a type of sorcery widespread among the native people of Central and North Mexico (Dow 1999) that uses small objects to cause pain in the body. It is not an illness, but is named after its treatment which consists of the removal of those objects from the body. Unexplained pains in the body together with a guilty conscience are its most characteristic features. The ability to cure it is a sure sign of being a brujo, and nobody therefore readily admits being able to do so. Therefore the subject is uneasily discussed, especially by brujos, or rejected as nonsense. Don Gualo pointed at the house of his neighbour, don Felix, and laughingly explained “sacar piedras is just a trick from brujos in which people believe”. Don Felix himself denied he would ever be doing such a thing, but admitted he asked someone from a neighbouring village to perform the treatment on him when his swollen legs did not cure. Other healers deny the existence of ‘saccar piedras’, like don Lorenzo who calls it “cheating” when people are made to believe in having been cured from it. But doña Celia simply referred to its existence and has less of a problem in explaining what it means. When someone is ill, it means according to brujos that there are pieces of stone, glass, hair, or nails inside the body. By smoking and chewing tobacco in combination with medicines – bought from her or made by the brujo – the pieces leave the body. Doña Celia told what happened to a relative of hers:

A boy from Zapatitlán, a relative of mine, carried wood home every day. His shoulder started aching a lot, the pain became increasingly worse and he did not know what was wrong, and the pain increased. He took pills against the pain and went to see a doctor, but nothing worked. He finally went to a bruja. His muscles were very cold, and she started rubbing them, just rubbing them. And he had to spit all the time, but nothing came out. She put his hand under his mouth and he kept on spitting. At a certain moment the bruja said she had something. It turned out to be a piece of wood. “How did the wood get there, what have you done, what have you stolen?” the bruja said. “Nothing, really nothing”, said the boy. “But you must have done something, otherwise how could the wood have gotten there. What did you steal?” “I have stolen nothing” said the boy “really, nothing”. But the bruja kept on saying he must have done something. “You have to tell me; because you could well be bewitched by the person you stole from. You must ask forgiveness to

31 I later found the victims’ formal complaint about the attack in the archive of the local authorities. Don Felix did not dispute the cause of death, but was keen enough to point at another reason besides the PRD that could have caused the fatal anger.
God, otherwise it will not pass off”. The boy still denied but finally said “I am poor, I can’t afford to buy wood. Every day I go to the land of a woman to fetch wood”. “Than it is surely this woman who had the piece of wood inserted”. Well, afterwards the boy did better; he did not have pain anymore. (Celia Manzano 1989)

Brujería as a last resort

A sick person tends to have ambiguous feelings about his sufferings because it is hard to know whether they are caused by his own personal wrongdoing or by the evil actions of an enemy (Galinier 1987:450). When misfortune or illness befalls a person or family that cannot be attributed to one of the already mentioned health problems, sorcery is a last resource. When a family or person continues to suffer despite the proper life they live, and when no other cause can be found and no cure has been helpful, people are sure that brujería has definitely been used. Whereas most illnesses are either caused by supernatural beings or humans, sorcery (including the already mentioned material infliction) is caused by the conscious efforts of a human being to provoke or change into a supernatural being to direct its actions against a particular person. Envy and jealousy are often mentioned as the reasons for this most negative and most feared exchange.

When someone has a grudge against another person, he or she will go to a brujo to ask for punishment through sorcery (brujería). The brujo is paid when he or she agrees to inflict sorcery irrespective of the results. When the victim gets sick his effort has succeeded. When the sick person is aware that this happened through sorcery, he or she may pay a brujo to undo it. People generally do not know how brujos work and brujos themselves are not keen to explain. According to don Felix brujería is caused by saying the name of a person before the devil. He says his own father died because of sorcery by his daughter-in-law. His father had been a victim of sorcery before, but his grandmother had called for the brujo who was responsible and threatened him until he got scared and took away the sorcery. “Sefue para resolver lapalabra, lapalabra del diabolo” (He went to undo the spell, the spell of the devil). Of course, people do not always know who inflicted the sorcery. One of the healers, don Lorenzo, was accused of sorcery by some catechists in 1988, because during the catechist meetings he said prayers that were not Catholic, but could be used to bewitch people. Don Lorenzo told me this was not the case, precisely because it was a prayer. He would only pray it for his own family at home, to ask for punishment when someone was trying to harm them. He would never use it otherwise, or upon request of other people. Once, however, don Lorenzo confessed he occasionally was a brujo.
Prayer to San Alejo

San Alejo, San Alejo
Three times I called you
How many times I was promised
Free me from all evil

These three crosses that I make
as a sign of a good Christian
so that you punish the hand
of the criminal or villain who
wants to do me harm

As you will crush the
tongue of who is talking bad
of me. I request you gloriously
San Alejo, do not abandon
the surroundings of my house
nor what is under my
obligation.

San Alejo, of the Lion
my enemies be they of the world,
of the sea and the mountains,
the persons who want to
betray me, by my God
that they will lose all
courage. Amen, Jesus.

San Alejo, San Alejo,
those evil neighbours
put them far, far away.
And let them not return here.

Oración a San Alejo

San Alejo, San Alejo
Trés veces te he dejado llamar
Cuantas veces se me ofresca
Librame de todo mal.

Estas tres cruces que hago en
señal del buen Cristiano
para que castigues la mano
del criminal o villano que
quiera hacerme mal.

Asi tambien quebraras la
lengua del que habla mal
de mi. Te reugo glorioso
San Alejo, no abandones
los alrededores de mi casa
ni lo que este al pie de mi
obligación.

San Alejo, del Leon
mis enemigos del mundo,
del mar y del monte sean,
las personas que quieren
tradicionarme, por mi Dios
se las caigan las alas del
corazón. Amen, Jesús.

San Alejo, San Alejo,
a estos malos vecinos
retira los lejos lejos.
Y no vuelven por aqui.

Apparently when someone says such prayers (especially since they do not resemble Catholic prayers said in mass) it is sufficient evidence to several Nanacatecos of brujería. "Normal people" do not have the power they say, to incite evil, and when Lorenzo does that must be a sign of him being a brujo himself: only brujos can inflict brujería, only brujos can undo brujería. People with a lot of fuerza are less likely to fall victim to sorcery but fuerza alone is not sufficient protection: if a strong person does something wrong or evil or neglects customary obligations, then he makes himself vulnerable to sorcery. As anyone can become the victim of sorcery, one needs brujos to undo it, and though such brujos can be respected per-
sons they usually bring about mixed feelings: they are admired for their strong power, but feared and despised for the possible harm they can inflict.

Conclusions

In Geertz’s view religion explains and helps to endure suffering, and provides ethical criteria for living a good life. In general it allows people to cope with chaos, injustice, and ignorance (Geertz 1973). Although his view of religion has been criticized for relying too much on a Christian tradition (Asad 2003), it is a useful perspective for looking at Nanacateco cosmology. This does not mean that all three functions of religion are equally important or that the way Nanacatecos explain life is only guided by local religious beliefs. To stay with Geertz: the “model for reality” is far more crucial than the “model of reality” and morality is what binds people.

This is obvious when looking at the explanatory power of Nanacateco cosmology. Nanacatecos share a moral order, with cuentos and chistes as frames of reference to guide them through everyday life and social relations, give meaning, and serve as a means of social control. They do not form a coherent metaphysical system (see also Ellison 2004:236-237) but tend to be fragments of a system from which obviously many parts have disappeared, particularly when it comes to origin stories. Explanations of the meaning of life with its poverty, suffering, and inequalities now come from a variety of sources and differ according to what is most on villager’s minds. Denominational religions have to some extent become important for explaining the origin of the world and humans – though people usually only have a superficial knowledge of Christian theology. Cuentos and historias remain important for explaining local origin and local characteristics. In the preceding chapter we saw the great influence of views about the past and politics, and how especially in the first part of the 1990s political explanations prevailed. Obviously education, television (especially soap operas), and government programmes also provide explanatory models, even when they provoke criticism or disagreement. People were well aware of a wider world, which needs different references. The Totonac worldview therefore had to make room for other ideological systems and had become one of the sources of explaining life. Nevertheless, because people were more concerned with local conditions in daily life than with those of the world at large, customary worldviews that are known though the ancestors remain important for Nanacatecos.

More crucial however, and at the heart of Nanacateco cosmology, are the moral guidelines expressed in the conceptualisation of good and evil or in more concrete terms in the ideas about the causes of sickness and ways to cure them. The stories people tell tend to focus on what had gone wrong and do not so much prescribe what should be done as what should be avoided. The local worldview is based on a personal relationship between the natural and the supernatural world materialized in the two human souls which connect humans to Patrons, animals, the souls (lis-
takna) of the dead, and mythical beings. This relationship not only determines the well-being of individuals but that of the community, which can be attacked by mythical beings such as the Hojs-Kaxi. If one person behaves improperly, he or she will fall ill. If many Nanacatecos behave badly, this can induce evil beings to damage the village and its inhabitants. They cause or try to cause epidemics, large-scale misfortune, the death of authorities, and even the total collapse of the village. It is precisely with stories of this kind i.e., what causes sickness and misfortune, that people rely on local traditions, as the outside world does not offer more adequate models. That outsiders often fail to comprehend and appreciate local views and practices only reinforces their value against sheer ignorance.

The arrival of new explanatory models has not only put an end to the Totonac worldview as the single or major source of meaning, but has obviously changed the role of healers and informal leaders. They have had to share their influence with doctors and nurses, licenciados, politicians, priests, and ministers. When everyday life experiences no major setbacks, curanderos may seem to be inconspicuous or even redundant. But when something unexpected or unintelligible happens, people know how to find them, even if only as a last resort. While priests and ministers are concerned with God or after-life and doctors, nurses, politicians, and licenciados with life, only healers are able to bridge the gap between life and the supernatural, including the dead. The local worldview and locals are thus concerned with life itself and how to protect or cure it from sickness and evil. When faced with disaster or when medical care has failed, villagers readily agree that they need the strongest possible protection, which only those who know local customs can give.

As Nanacatecos are focused on life and staying alive, it is not surprising that precisely these explanations and practices about illness and healing so central to the local worldview are hidden from outsiders. Knowledge is for insiders, and what is not known cannot be (mis)used or condemned by outsiders. Perhaps therefore Protestantism can pose a far greater threat to this worldview than Catholicism, because priests are invariably well-educated outsiders, while pastors can more easily come from within the community. According to their cosmology, Nanacatecos rely on each other for a prosperous personal and community life. As they know each other intimately, they can easily link personal and social events to the local worldview and thus reinforce morality in a pervasive and detailed manner even while disagreeing about the exact nature of a particular misfortune.

This chapter showed that managing illness and misfortune is not primarily a matter of healing, but of preventing chaos and disturbances in the fragile balance between humans and the supernatural world. Prevention is more important than curing. In the next chapter I turn to the ways in which Nanacatecos maintain this balance at the level of the community and the household by performing what they call costumbres, reflecting the major themes of Totonac worldview. In these performances, religious ideas and practices merge, showing that life as it is lived and life as it should be lived are one and the same. Ritual performances – though often deriving
their strength from their timeless appearance and interpretation – are far from static, but

... are occasions in which ... we reflect upon and define ourselves, dramatize our collective myths and history, present ourselves with alternatives, and eventually change in some ways while remaining the same in others (MacAlloon 1984:1).

And as there is no longer a single worldview or religious framework that provides the cultural repertoire of rituals, Nanacatecos increasingly need to discuss, adapt, and perform rituals in their pluriform and diasporic community as we will see in the coming chapter.