

# Superficially, the Sacred The Otomi Indians before the Stranger

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The following event dates back more than twenty years, when I made contact for the first time with the Otomi Indians in the craggy regions of the eastern Sierra Madre. At that time I went through life fortified by the hope and inspired by the naiveté and enthusiasm that I would add a supplementary stroke of the brush to the ethnographic picture of Indian Mexico. The disposition of my mind was far from that of a researcher seized by the expectancy of the unforeseen, desirous to change the all too static and stereotypical image of the autochthonous communities that the academic tradition had created of the Americas.

In the course of time it seemed to me that, quite to the contrary, I secretly wished to develop a system of the native world that conformed as much as possible to the one that adorned Mexican literature when it drew, before our eyes, upon the Aztec and Mayan cosmologies. But, alas, while blurring, in selective manner, the internal order of the religions among these societies, colonization emerged as making the postulated analogies more problematic. The cultural response of the Otomi of the Sierra Madre to the impact of Catholicism has been to compress the universe into an elevated, celestial sphere that is put under the guidance of the Christian God, called *Santisimo* (identified by sun light), on the one hand, and an inferior sphere, that of the Otomi, where the Devil is revealed as being the prestigious administrator. Humanity finds itself divided according to the same principle. Between the two there is a coherent series of homologies in rituals, myths, and in daily language. With zeal and punctuality the Otomi devote themselves to the ceremonial duties that the Christian religion and

the celebration of the local saintly patron prescribes for them. But the emotion, the quivering that confirm the nocturnal encounters, in grottos and private sanctuaries, with the divinities of the underworld are not perceptible. Held for most of the time in a chaste muteness, these men and women appear as if they were crushed by a fate that had been so catastrophic for them, thereby reinforcing the conventional image of the emblematic Indian who has lapsed into a neurasthenic silence and who, ever since the Colonial period, has not failed to attract the attention of travelers.

Against this image, I wanted to set another, more precarious one. It emerged only after the agonies and frustrations caused by the impenetrability of the vernacular language, which lasted for many years, had been overcome. Little by little it seemed to me that the Otomi kept a secret garden. In order to penetrate it, it seemed best to share in the kind of supreme satisfaction attached to the invocation of the abject, of the scatological — in one word, dirt (*s'o*), the excuse for innumerable puns; a kind of discipline or societal game that is called "bad mouth" (*s'o ra nde*) and designates the origins of cultural difference that is reflected in the word of the spirit. In such circumstances it becomes clear that the aestheticizing picture of Indian societies that is presented in ethnological museums could not match at all that singular and often prosaic reality on the ground. Why not give credit to the tenets of a radical sociology that appeared to have accomplished, in this period, an irreversible work of mourning on the world of the Indians, repeating to whoever wanted to hear it that all that existed were archaic reflexes joined to the religious tradition of the half-bred *campesinos*?

For a long time it seemed futile to me to hope for something else than those spectacular puns from my Otomi informants, punctuating the dismal and ponderous rainy days that passed in an atmosphere consisting of ethylic vapors and the vomit of public houses. What could I direct my interest at if my interlocutors attached so little attention to those absurd questions concerning the existence of a cosmological knowledge buried in the meandering of time? As to the latter, it seemed to me that I had to assume

its destruction. Under my eyes, fascinating rituals were still taking place some of which were related to “nocturnal” practices through the veneration of ancestral bones; others through acts that were linked to agrarian fertility, giving me to understand, silently, that essential stakes were being erected here. However, when my friends decided to become more talkative, during those daily spells that provided them with *aguardiente*, only two themes dominated the conversations: sex and death.

Paradoxically that extreme strangeness of Otomi thought that turned me away from a path of conventional investigation, would, in a subtle way, take me back to a familiar world — that of my infancy into which no adults had ever entered; a sphere that was sentient of the dust and the humid soil in the darkness of caves, the place of disturbing dreams — the preferred universe of my predilections. To go further, as much as in space as into the depths of an Amerindian thought, to “dip” into the world of “the other side” meant to retrieve the most intimate; that which had been suppressed through a long apprenticeship of living in society, in one word to become again *zubi*, i.e., the “woman of excrement.” One can understand immediately that the term — applied to “gringos” (European or American travelers) — is not being used in a deprecating way. In the lowlands one adds the prefix *sa* to *zubi* that indicates a foul smell, thus putting a touch of humor to this odd name. Little by little comments by the natives provided me with a more precise meaning: the puzzle of assigning the feminine gender to a stranger resolved itself if one accepted the premises of a logic that simultaneously attributed antithetical qualities to the same object, and in particular to supernatural entities, to those creatures that came from the world below — whence strangers necessarily came (combining categories that were simultaneously linked to masculinity and femininity, to purity and dirt).

Within that society the image of the stranger, at its most disturbing, is ultimately the image of the self, of the autochthonous. This is why the ritual of “opening” that liberates the forces of the underworld, hidden behind the exuberance of a carnival, causes figures to rise in the midst of the living as distinct as the Otomi

ancestors, these “rotten fathers,” the demons of vegetation, or as all those emblematic people who come from the urban world, be it the “engineer,” the “doctor,” or the “soldier,” “Adolf Hitler” or “Marilyn Monroe.” This ritual “game” initiated the idea of an infinite predation, by virtue of which the protagonists of a future mankind, indefinitely recreated as identical, are sucked up, then recomposed in the subterranean world, in the space of the self, the Otomi nation. To be “rotten” and “stinking” is the price of being made an ancestor, i.e., of becoming the most splendid among the Otomi.

In the Otomi version, History is being conceived as a cyclical movement that causes all living beings to kind of “teeter” in “rottenness.” It comprises both man’s destiny and his astral projection, the Sun/Christ, evoked above, whose sacrifice is being repeated indefinitely every evening at sunset. This spatial-temporal episode is being interpreted by the Indians as an event that, in its most abrupt, reveals a kind of quintessence of the indigenous sacred, the *sunt’uski*, a term whose semantic meaning evokes the skin of a fruit that is being peeled off (e.g., of an agave for extracting its juice that is then made into a fermented drink called “pulque”). This moment is called *makhwani*, “the place of the cut,” the “place of truth,” in reference to the spot where a woman, equipped with her serrated vagina, induces a rupture, a fragmentation of that sacrificial body that is represented by the penis of her partner, his “small tail” with which she will produce a child that she bears inside her. Through this drama of cosmic proportions (of which the moon, a “mutilated” masculine figure, periodically sends us back an image), the society of the living recovers its place. The man “without a foot” (sexless) thus becomes the carrier of *mbeti*, of a deficiency — a term that, in its feminine form, designates the richness that the parturient woman expels from her abdomen.

The “place of truth” presents itself as the spot, the fulcrum of a “vision” that is also that of a girl at the moment of her defloration. She takes the place of the “knowledge of the world” (*pati ra simhoi*), that is of the devil, who bears that same name. The moment that is called orgasm in European languages is called “clear vision” (*numaho*) or the gaze (*nu*) entered in the spot (*ma*) of

the hole (*ho*), or that which has a lethal dimension. That “knowledge of the world,” that is conceived of as a tearing, a sort of Indian *aletheia*, then becomes the access to a truly “encyclopedic” knowledge, an absolute knowledge. Here, it seems to me, we touch on the foundations of a sensualist theory of knowledge that constructs, by reference to a whole series of physiological processes, a comprehensive cognitive system centered on the discovery of the “world beneath.” It is a world that is identified by this bodily half, the “Otomi half,” where *toza*, the Ancient Sack — another metaphor for devil — lives who somehow fulfills the function of a psychological cover situated somewhere in the lower part of the body, of a storer of events. The Ancient Sack presents himself as a collector of those manifestations of decay, translated into mnemonic traces, of acts or violence or of embraces between lovers, of words and instances of silence. The rituals of the “opening” thus, through the skewing of these ancestral figures, lay bare in a noisy manner the contents, the “rotten fathers,” wearing frightening masks that express all the world’s ugliness, i.e., its invisible beauty.

This “diurnal” body, that of the “upper” half, hypostatized somewhat, taken charge of by the religion of the colonizer, this embalmed body, swaddled by Christian morality, is contrasted by the Otomi with the nocturnal body of the lower region, the contaminated body, the “half belonging to the devil.” Among the number of multiple heteronyms we must count *zithu* (“the name eater”), a term that reveals a kind of cannibalist sensibility -that propensity to devour the identity of individuals in order to create something new, for which the sex offered by the woman is the uncontested driving force; a sex assimilated to a machine for the manufacture of events in order to master the age by producing death, i.e., something alive. The stranger is called upon to participate in this process, much like the citizen of *takwati*, of the “world on the other side,” whose reemergence on earth, among the Otomi, could only reactivate this movement, according to this logic of energy transfer of whose vital importance we are reminded in the coming and going of the ancestors, the feast day of the dead. All this designates the observer as an activator of force

— his physical appearance, his language, his experience of writing — and hence of knowledge, manipulated, one believes, for the ends of persecution or restoration; a knowledge that indicates his intimate connivance with the devil.

To tell the truth, this “dirty” word which was directed at me, the word *sunt’uski* (“delicate”) came to make sense because two energy poles were brought together, one being indigenous and the other western. At bottom, the “sacred” was nothing else than what at a given moment was affected by a vibration, a kind of an epidermic stimulation (the noun for skin, *si*, also means decay); it is a symptom of a resonance with the world of the “grand life,” i.e., that of the dead. It matters little in this context that one of the protagonists is a foreigner to this culture, to this little universe of a sleepy village that is closed to them. His presence nevertheless suffices to engender agitation, to trigger an uproar, to establish for a while an underground theater on the public stage. Inscribed, carved into the “skin,” that lethal vibration turns the ethnologist into an inventor of the sacred, someone who manifests, willy-nilly, the secret harmony between people here and those elsewhere, all coming from the same container, the cosmic Ancient Sack.

This curious paradox would no doubt seem comical, if it were not otherwise the sign of a history filled with pathos. The Otomi of the older generation whom I encountered, still monolingual, have never stopped representing to me the belief that the world would not finally exhaust itself. Taking me as a witness, they evoked a golden age, that they situated around the turn of the century when the earth was still fertile and promising abundant harvests. An identifiable cause has to be attributed to such decrepitude, namely the withering away of the “faith,” i.e., of tradition, and what recently magnified the rigid observance of rituals that are dedicated to the earth-mother. This continued decay of the devotions of yester-year, accentuated in recent decades, endangered the energetic reactivation the ancestors had called for. As far as the ethnologist is concerned, he finds himself called upon in these rituals to renew this process. It is the “sacred of the others” that the Otomi in turn solicit. In a discreet way, the visitor

finds himself offering the most neglected task, i.e., to be quite simply there as the active agent of this mechanism; without this he would find himself indulging in a sanctimonious admiration for all that is archaic and obsolete in the indigenous culture, feeling compelled to reconstitute it in order to justify his presence. To tell the truth, it was only a few years later that it became clear to me: the disorder that the presence of the intruder created coincided with an expectation, namely that of an unexpected event to be re-enacted in indigenous mind frames through a healthy new injection of "decay," of ancestrality, in a world given to deliquescence. And this "cannibalism" without frontiers, based on the endless absorption of names, of exotic figures, of foreign statutes that were redistributed in the underworld, the world of the Otomi, was the primary condition for the revival of the sacred.