



Mesoweb Articles

Blood and Rain

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In Mexico the beginning of the rainy season is closely tied to the hurricane season, since it is hurricanes that bring the ocean's moisture hundreds of kilometers inland. And the hurricane season usually starts towards mid-May. In regions with significant indigenous populations, it is very common for the agricultural season to be marked by the celebration of rites for propitiating rain. Given the prevalence of rain-dependent agriculture throughout Mesoamerica, it is not an overstatement to say that the subsistence of entire communities depends on the success of propitiation rites for insuring a successful planting and a benign rain regime, so that young plants do not die from lack of water, an excess of it, or destruction by hail.

Realizing the overriding importance of these ceremonies in community life, the first Catholic evangelists saw the convenience of incorporating the rituals into the festivities of the newly introduced religion, associating them with the Christian celebration of the Holy Cross, which takes place on the third of May. This process was facilitated not only because of the calendrical coincidence, but also the fact that a symbol closely resembling the Christian cross already had a long and deep pedigree in Mesoamerica as a representation of the cosmic tree—the primordial maize plant and cosmogram by which a community locates itself on the earth in connection with the cardinal points of east and west, the heavens, and the underworld. Nowadays and even in urban contexts, the festivities of the Holy Cross in Mesoamerica continue to make numerous references to rain and reveal a fascinating juxtaposition of Prehispanic and Christian beliefs. In many places the processional crosses associated with these dates are known as “water crosses.”

What follows is the chronicle of a visit carried out during these very important dates to two towns in the modern state of Guerrero: Acatlán and Zitlala, two towns that celebrate the dates in a unique fashion, in which it is possible to appreciate with special clarity the survival of beliefs whose conceptual antiquity must be considerable, as we shall see.¹

Acatlán

The Holy Cross festivities normally last for several days, in the course of which different ritual phases are enacted. At Acatlán, the rites are known as *atzatziliztli*, and they start on the second of May with a visit to a shrine at the top of the hill known as Hueyetépetl. The ascent begins two to three hours before dawn, and reaching the shrine may take between four and six hours depending on the physical fitness of the participant. Pilgrims carry heavy baskets full of tamales, as well as animals and candles for the purpose of making sacrifices and offerings. Along the way there are small altars with *quemaderos* (burning areas) where pilgrims light candles and leave them behind as offerings. Once the top of the hill is reached, participants make additional offerings to the three crosses at the summit shrine, known by the name of *Cruzco* (a mixed Spanish/Nahuatl name that means “at the place of the Cross”), requesting both rain and protection of crops against hail. Despite the collective nature of this great procession, ceremonies are not

¹ Acatlán is a town in the municipality of Chilapa de Álvarez, Guerrero, founded by indigenous populations who migrated from the state of Puebla. Its Nahuatl name means “at the place of reeds.” The name Zitlala comes from the Nahuatl word *citlalan* or “at the place of stars.”

conducted in a coordinated or centralized manner. Rather, each family is in charge of making its own offerings and its own petitions. Once the rites are completed (including specific ceremonies carried out at the site of a small spring), tamales and chicken broth (prepared with chickens that have been sacrificed as offerings to the crosses) are handed out to all pilgrims, and shortly thereafter everyone starts to climb down from the hill. The ritual day is closed with a procession and a ceremony held at the town church. At Acatlán there are no hotels, and my companions and I are forced to spend the night in Tlapa, the largest town in the region and the entryway to the Guerrero highlands.

The ritual activity of our second day at Acatlán begins in the early afternoon, but it is the most widely attended and is therefore the climax of community celebrations. We are back at Acatlán somewhere around two o'clock and there is hardly anyone in sight. The sleepy town looks half-deserted. We look at each other with concern, wondering whether we have come to the right place to watch the ceremonies. Nothing indicates anything is about to happen, nor are there any evident preparations for festivities. There are only a couple of soda and candy vendors and the occasional child distractedly crossing the open area by the church atrium. The mixture of heat and boredom translate into sleepiness, and almost without realizing it I end up dozing off a couple of times on the hard cement of a low wall in the square.

At around three o'clock, some music finally begins to be heard, fast approaching. A few minutes later the first group of ritual dancers makes its entry into the square: boys and girls dressed in multicolored costumes and masks begin a kind of festive procession that reaches the door of the church and then marches out again, repeatedly coming in and out of the atrium amid great clatter and dense clouds of copal smoke. The arrival of modernity into this traditional town has not weakened collective enthusiasm for its ceremonies, but it has made itself felt in ritual attire, and nowadays one sees a variety of sneakers, tee shirts with all kinds of legends on them, sunglasses, and other elements that at first sight do not appear to have any role to play in the parade, the main characters of which are the *tecuanes* or *tigres* (tigers), together with their *chiches* or dogs.

The hullabaloo gets launched for a second time when a group known as the *tlacololeros*¹ comes into the square, complete with its own drums and wind instruments. The costumes of these *tlacololeros* are very different from the ones we have seen among the first group. They don a kind of overcoat made of sacking, which covers their torsos. Still other participants can be made out because they are covered by large red

paliacates (ornate kerchiefs). They come into the square together with the *tlacololeros* and represent the winds (probably because winds are the bearers of rain) as they run ceaselessly from one end of the square to the next (just like the winds). Every now and then they briefly stop at a spot and proffer a lamentation: —“*Aaaaay!*— that symbolizes the howling of the winds. All dancers then go into the church in order to receive a blessing that marks the beginning of the day's rites.

Coming out of the church, all dancers and symbolic characters then take to the main street of Acatlán, heading west. By then most of the town's inhabitants have come out of their houses and have begun to walk towards a hilly place just outside of town that is known by the name of Komulian, where additional petition ceremonies are to be held, as well as the ritual fights of the *tigres* that distinguish these unique ceremonies. Along the road to Komulian there are many small altars at ground level formed by small crosses adorned with flowers, at which pilgrims make offerings, light candles, and make the sign of the cross before continuing on their way. The crosses themselves are gradually covered in flowers, *tlaquentis* (ritual textiles), seeds, and many different kinds of offerings. The gradual adornment of these crosses transforms them into flowery trees that symbolize the very abundance that is being asked of them.

In a little under two hours, some two or three thousand people have gathered at Komulian. Among this multicolored human flood, attention is drawn by the many men and young boys dressed in full-body yellow suits with black spots or stripes. These are the *tigres* (the name by which jaguars are now known in many parts of Mexico) that will soon be fighting each other here. They all carry in one arm a fanciful mask, usually made with stiffened leather and painted in lively colors, with peccary bristles for whiskers and eyebrows, while on many of them mirrors substitute for eyes.

It is very likely that today's ceremonies are the result of the transformation of ancient fights or even ritual wars, the original purpose of which must have been the spilling of blood on the earth so as to propitiate the fall of vital rain upon it. Throughout the years (centuries?), the original intent of these ceremonies was probably obscured, turning them into traditions whose roots are now almost impossible to trace. This makes it extremely difficult to find a clear confirmation of their meaning. Be that as it may, modern participants in these symbolic struggles are protected both by their fanciful masks and by thick gloves, which almost guarantee there are few chances of anything more than a symbolic spilling of blood. Nonetheless, the ritual drama is electrifying, given its ceremonial context, its massive collective participation, its music, its dances, and the general visual richness of the costumes, but also because of the closeness of the action (virtually a few

² A *tlacolol* is a cultivation field on the shoulder of a hill. By extension, a *tlacololero* is someone who tends to these fields.

inches away) that physically involves the spectators in this ritual violence. A Western observer may be tempted to consider these fights in terms of a symbolic struggle between the forces of good and evil, but it is probably more accurate to interpret them as a recreation of the struggle of the forces of an un-idealized Nature, one in which different powers supplement each other and are neither good nor bad. They are merely the confrontation of life and death, rain and drought: the two faces that a coin needs in order to exist... It is even tempting to toy with the idea of identifying a tangible vestige of the ancient beliefs hiding in the mirrors that form the eyes of the masks. I wonder whether it would be legitimate to interpret these as a reference to the name of one of the most important cosmic forces: Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror?

Be that as it may, by the time most people have arrived at Komulian and as the music plays from multiple bands and dancers move throughout the hilly area, the principal citizens of Acatlán withdraw to a spring in order to carry out rites that are for their eyes only. Their return from the spring marks the informal beginning of the *tigre* fights, where males of all ages take part.

Any *tigre* can challenge another *tigre* to a fight. When this happens, an *amarrador* (literally "the one who ties") makes sure that both the mask and the gloves of each fighter are firmly fastened. The *amarrador* also plays the role of referee, enforcing the very simple rules of these combats: fighters can only hit each other using their hands, and a fight is over the moment one of them requests it. Fights start randomly, whenever a challenge is thrown down and accepted anywhere on these ritual grounds. As soon as a fight begins, the public steps back, opening a clearing in which fighters can engage each other. If the clearing becomes too small, denying combatants freedom of movement, the characters called *tlacololeros* crack their whips and force the people to step back. The role of *tlacololeros* is thus to maintain a certain order, although they also play a comic role that adds to the people's entertainment. As soon as a fight ends, combatants withdraw and the spectators quickly close the clearing. A clearing can be opened at any other point though, and the whole action is played again, over and over. Some fights involve boys as young as six or seven, while still others involve adolescents and young adults. At any given time there can be several fights going on, each with a pair or more of combatants within a clearing. Aside from their ritual purpose, I suspect these fights also provide a way of venting personal conflicts and quarrels in a context that is both controlled and focused in such a manner that their solution contributes positively to the community.

Fights continue until sunset, at which point everything ends and the whole community starts back towards Acatlán.

Zitlala (and a small detour to Juxtlahuaca)

Alfreda Gasparillo, the daughter of a leading citizen of Zitlala, is an independent and enterprising woman. Aside from being a teacher, she owns a store that sells agricultural products and equipment and is very knowledgeable of her town's traditions. Waiting for the culminating day in the rites of Zitlala, which take place on May 5, Alfreda invites us to the town of Colotlipa for the purpose of visiting the Juxtlahuaca cave, in which very ancient Prehispanic vestiges have been preserved. In the absence of a hotel, we spend the night of the fourth sleeping on makeshift beds in the upper story of the store Alfreda has in town. The next morning, after an abundant breakfast of eggs and beans, we start out for the cave.

In order to get there we must take a winding, dusty road that cuts its way through *huizaches* and other thorny bushes that have managed to survive the prolonged dry season. Finally we get to the entrance of the cave, which nowadays is protected by a heavy iron gate. We don't get to see one, but the guide says that it is very common to observe a large rat-eating snake coiled up in this gate. From its position the snake patiently waits for a chance to ambush an unlucky bat out of the tens of thousands that leave the cave every night in search for food. We enter the cave and soon after the morning sunlight is left behind us, the light of our lamps begins to reveal some of the cave fauna, among which my attention is drawn to some very large, whitish cockroaches that crawl lazily along the cave walls.

The main cave passage branches out to form moderately spacious alcoves, and these are the places normally preferred by bats to gather and rest. The floor in these alcoves can be heavily layered with bat guano that can be as much as two yards thick. Its decomposition causes the temperature to rise sensibly. Sometimes the heat thus generated can be felt merely by crossing in front of the entryways to these natural alcoves.

The first human vestige we come upon is the so-called Hall of the Dead, where we can see some skulls and other bones which, because of the high ambient moisture, have begun a curious process of melding into the floor and walls of the cave. We stop for a few minutes to examine and comment on these remains. At approximately one kilometer from the entrance to the cave, we come upon its most famous and important painting. Its bright colors have managed to survive remarkably well. The image is a representation of two individuals. One of them is shown standing, dressed in the pelt of a jaguar. Protruding from the forehead of this character is a headdress from which a panache of long green feathers rises and curves backward gracefully. He holds in his right hand a three-pronged element that brings to mind similar objects that appear

on Olmec monuments and which very probably were used as weapons. His left hand holds a long element, probably a rope of some sort or perhaps a snake. The second character is much smaller than the first. He is shown in a head-on view, kneeling in front of the standing character in a position of submission. His features are not clear, although he appears to be wearing a black mask. If the long element that the first character is holding in his left hand is a rope, this second character could well be his prisoner. I can't get it out of my mind that in a few more hours we will be witnessing the ritual fights for which the town of Zitlala is renowned. These fights take place between men dressed as jaguars, and considering that the combatants strike each other using ropes it is very tempting to see a possible connection between the aforementioned fights and the subject matter of the painting before which we are now standing. A few yards from this scene there are two other groups of paintings. The first of them shows the red silhouette of a jaguar, while the second represents a red supernatural snake, the head of which appears to sport a feather panache. It is impossible to know if these paintings are part of any kind of narrative.

The cave goes on, we are told, for several kilometers; nevertheless, we must consider ourselves satisfied with what we have seen and cannot continue our visit, since we still have to reach Zitlala if we don't want to miss the *tigre* fights we have come to see.

We get to Zitlala at around one o'clock and we head directly for Alfreda's father's house. Several young *tigres* give the finishing touches to their fantastic masks and down shots of high-octane alcoholic drinks, probably to improve their courage for the upcoming fights. As in Acatlán it is difficult to know how much these rites are still understood as something closely linked to the petition of rain for agriculture and how much is carried on by sheer force of tradition. In this last regard, I certainly find it remarkable when we are told that one of this house's *tigres* works as a busboy in a New York City restaurant. Despite the great distance and expense (not to mention the likely problems getting back into the U.S.), this young man has returned to his native town so as not to miss out on the opportunity to fight for his *barrio*.

In contrast with the way the ritual fights are carried out in Acatlán, in Zitlala one does not strike one's opponent with the hands. *Tigre* fighting in Zitlala makes use of a weapon manufactured with a piece of rope called a *cuarta*, one of the ends of which is tied up in a long, heavy knot. This knot crowns the end of a section of the rope that has been twisted, moistened, and then dried under the sun, in a procedure repeated several times over many days until it becomes a kind of heavy rope club, the other end of which is several yards long and is rolled around the fighter's waist, in

order to protect the kidneys against blows from the opponent. In order to don this complex attack/defense system, all *tigres* are helped by assistants who wrap their waists carefully with the loose end of the rope, leaving just enough rope along one arm in order to allow free use of the "club."

Perhaps more so than in Acatlán, many of the costumes of the *tigres* in Zitlala have suffered from modifications brought about by the modern world. The more traditional participants wear a full-body yellow or orange suit, marked by black spots or stripes. Some variants of these suits are dark green or even black. But it is equally common nowadays to see *tigres* wearing blue jeans and tee shirts with all manners of advertising, political propaganda, or even the names of American universities. The fighting involves men from the three main barrios that make up the community of Zitlala. As soon as the participants in our house are ready they go out on the street to join the group of other *tigres* from the Cabecera barrio, who are already on the street, dancing and cavorting to the quasi-hypnotic music played by a band made up of percussion and wind instruments. Thus a kind of procession begins, in which the *tigres* slowly dance and gyrate to the delight of their fans. After going through several streets the procession stops at the small atrium of a neighborhood church. They are joined here by a second group of *tigres* who represent the San Diego barrio, who arrive with their own musicians. After a sort of "band duel," both groups resume the procession through the streets of the town, which ends only when they get to the main square, to one side of the main church and in front of the municipal building.

The place is already bursting with those who don't want to miss the fights, and even the roofs of adjacent buildings are full of people jockeying for the best view possible. Shortly after the Cabecera and San Diego *tigres* arrive, the *tigres* from the rival San Francisco barrio make their own entry into the main square, accompanied by their own band. In contrast to what we saw at Komulian (Acatlán), all *tigres* in Zitlala are adults. As far as I can tell, individual fighting begins without a clear starting signal. All that is needed is for a challenge to be made and accepted and the thick crowd backs a little bit to form a clearing for the fighting *tigres*. Even though it is inevitable that *tigres* use their free hand to strike and pull at their adversary, the goal of the fight is to land as many blows as possible on the opponent's body with one's heavy rope club. Judging from the strength of the blows and the low thud they produce, the protection afforded by the rope tied around the waist can hardly be enough. Indeed and despite the hot May weather, many participants have opted for thick jackets and even line their torsos with thick fabric, towels, etc., in order to try and dampen the blows. There are of course those who defy their adversaries by doing battle protected only with a

light tee shirt with the rope coiled around their waists, but they appear to be in the minority. As in Acatlán, there are *amarradores* who help combatants fasten their masks and who also play the role of referees. The rules are similar to Komulian's, and it suffices for one of the fighters to request it for a fight to be over. There are those who merely exchange a handful of blows before stopping, but there are also fights that go on for several minutes, with each of the combatants sustaining multiple blows, although it is very difficult to know how much harm or pain they are truly inflicting on one another. The crowd moves in and closes a space where a pair of fighting *tigres* stood barely a minute ago, only to form a new opening where another fight is starting, one in which different participants, with their distinctive masks and costumes, take part. The

ecstatic crowd completely fills the square, and it is impossible not to be stepped on and pushed this way and that by the tide of people that surges to the left, then to the right, trying to get a better view or merely to avoid finding themselves in the way of a *tigre* and his fearsome rope-club blows.

As the sun goes down, exhaustion begins to take its toll among the still-standing *tigres* (some of whom have fought on more than one occasion). Public enthusiasm begins to ebb and, as quickly as it began, the fighting stops and the crowd begins to dissolve.

Both winning and losing *tigres* have garnered the respect of their community through their courage and fighting spirit, and they hope they may also have been able to win the favor of the master of the water, who must grant rain for one more year.



Acatlán





























































































For more photographs, see <http://tinyurl.com/87chs5v>.