

Atsatsilistli  
To cry, yell, and plead for the rain

*Hello, my name is Vanessa Medina Martinez, I am original from the community of Acatlan in the municipality of Chilapa, Mexican State of Guerrero, I studied in the National School of Anthropology and History and as a part of the graduation programme I participated in the Project Analysis and Production of Ethnographic Film directed by my teacher who also accompanies me, Elisa Lipkau. In this project it was where the idea of producing a documentary film was articulated, around a ceremony that I was very interested in documenting in my community which is called Rain Petition Ceremony in the state of Guerrero, I am a Nahuatl speaker and I as a part of that community I was really interested in this celebration, in particular a very brief and beautiful ritual that happens during those days of the Rain Petition which is called: The Handing of the Tomoxochitl Flower, but to be able to understand this important moment and so important as it is a compromise ritual or wedding promise, we have to know the evolution of the Festivity of Rain Petition or better known as Atsatsilistli.*

*And what is very beautiful of this tradition is that many people of my community that have migrated to other places, in order to look for better job opportunities, return in this season in this date, to meet their families, to be part of this ceremony and celebrate the first days of May. Within this ceremony a lot of dancers participate, like Tecuanes (Jaguars), Tlacololeros, (Peasants), Cotlatlatsin (Dancers of the Wind Spirit) it is a very emotive moment and full of festivity. I invite you to enjoy this beautiful material we have prepared and I also want to have the help of my uncle Constatino Medina for the interpretation of this documentary, and he is also a student of this school but he studied the speciality of Etno-History So it seemed very important for me to listen as well how he explains the relevance of this festivity and what could be better than listening it from his testimony as a member of the community of Acatlan and as a professional in the field of anthropology*

*Uncle can you tell us a little about the meaning of the Rain Petition?*

How is it called?

*Rain Petition*

But how is it called?

*“El” Atsatsilistli*

Aha!

Rain Petition is done during the second day of May, basically, in the peak of the great mountain in Acatlan called *Huey Tépetl* there in Acatlán; The Rain Petition comes from very far away, we can depart from the fall of Tenochtitlan, when all the people and human groups (of the region) were dominated by the Spanish Invasion, so many peasants ran away from them and got refuge in the mountains, that is why they arrived in our town, because there are huge mountains, the climax of the ritual is the Tiger Fight where two persons offer themselves, as an auto sacrifice, that is the climax, to offer your own self: in Nahuatl we say *Huenchihualistli*, *huentli* is offering and *huenchihualistli* is the absolute noun prefix which means that someone turns into in the same person that the offering is done to, so to beat the hell out of someone is to offer yourself. For what reason? For the gods! So that they know you make this huge effort so that it rains (so when they fight themselves and they are hitting themselves very hard,

people shout at them, "hit him very hard so that it rains", I do not know if you have heard this, but when the beats of the tigers are heard those noises imitate the rain when it is heard and roars, even leaving an echo in the mountains and caves, so this is it, this is very important what I see in the ritual of the rain petition in Acatlán, Guerrero (The place of the Cane Warrior) The most important is the people that get together in this sacred place to invoke the gods that are hidden behind caves and mountains, only that afterwards the Conquest came and the Colonial Period which brings the cross and Christianity with it but this is the mixture or the religious syncretism, as it is called.

And the popular catholicism is observed, which combines elements of the pre-Hispanic times and Catholic elements, as the prayers, the offerings which are placed besides the cross are part of the pre-Hispanic times or the killing of chicken in the rock of sacrifice is pre-Hispanic, so all the different representations are there together, combined and they do not fight, they get along very well, they are combined and this is the way they believe, but we know they are invoking the ancient gods, to know the so called "Tlalocues". And this is very important this fact, that happens in the small towns the practice another type of religion which is not only Catholic or Pre-Hispanic it is combined.

Like the offerings, the dancers,  
Chanting

But since these societies were peasants so the most important thing is that their life cycle, their economy was based on agriculture, this is where they got all the products to sustain themselves, so then sometimes water became scarce and as believers of ancient divinities they started to invoke them with rituals,

Prayers to saint Mary

So in this way all the people that ran away from the invasion; you know that almost all towns (in ancient Mexico) were dominated, basically Texcoco, Tenochtitlan and the surrounding villages from the Valley of Mexico, so these people had to go and populate other places and that was the first thing they did when they arrived to their new towns, the rain petition. The rain petition is an agricultural ritual.

Chanting in latin

It is from the agricultural cycle, that is why when they ask for water is when they are going to start (planting) and the rains are coming, so that rains will be good for the crops, so that the earth may be fertile and crops won't be missing for the people. In Acatlan and Citlala they practice those rituals. They keep an agricultural calendar and they follow it. Simultaneously there are these rituals in other surrounding town, Colotlipa, Xochitempa, Atliaca and many others like Tixtla but I mainly focus in Acatlan and Citlala, because they are neighbours.

The second of may all the people reunite up there in the mountain. In these times everyone is a merchant or professional, the agriculture is almost finished, is not used, the land is abandoned because it is not fertile any more and the economy has changed. But notwithstanding people continue remembering their millenary rituals, and they go up there, merchants, professionals of all kinds, migrants, everybody gets together in a strange alliance up there in the mountain to invoke the gods, the gods who refuse to die, for the same people that are making them alive again with their ritual and it is very important because the Atsatsilistli communal comes from the community, indigenous nahua community mh, they speak nahuatl as you know, so they make their petition pleading with different ritual performances, between them there are three main and big dances: the dance of the Tlacololeros, the dance of the Cotlatlatzin and the tiger fight there are three right?

Because further back our culture comes from other older cultures, and groups of population from very ancient times called olmecs, who occupied the caves of Oxtotitlan, we can see in those caves and drawings all their ritual, so the tiger fight is not really a tiger fight but they are ocelome or jaguars, because there were lots of them in those ancient times, later I even saw when I was a child some small wild cats like this, they were called small tigers, pups, but those came from the big ones called jaguars and you can see them in those caves. So it is related to them as a totemic ancestor, just like the olmecs were called Tenocelome because they had a big mouth just like jaguars did. And they had these jaguars as their totemic animal it comes from their ethnic origin and you can see it, I do not know if you have seen this representation of a man partly animal, where there is another way of considering this petition. As I have repeated it comes from an agricultural ritual.

From the three dances I mentioned which are the most important, they are all dancers who recreate propitiatory rituals, this means that they imitate something. The cotlatlatzin for example are known as "ehecame", (those who are like the wind) they represent the wind. You know that when rains are coming the first thing that appears is the wind, the strong wind that brings the clouds, so Ehecame comes from Ehécatl the god of the Wind, they are called Ehecame or Cotlatlatzin, I think this had another meaning because they carry the teponaztle (wooden drum). The ehecame represent the wind and their cries or screams are to implore, when they shout looking upwards..., they take their heads back and shout, I do not know if you have seen it. That is the rain pleade (to ask for the rain). Their hair represent the long clouds and they also have another representation which is the stick, the one they move with their feet, I do not know if you have seen them, but each color has a different symbolism and there are seven colors.

Speaking about the cotlatlatzin and the scream they do that you just mentioned, there is also a sound like "oi, oi, uh hm, uh hm", oh yes that is an indicator of who they are because they want people to listen and know who are they and what they represent, that is why they go like moaning,

I think this is also a very ancient dance, and in the past this ritual was registered by a priest to did his research through the state of Jalisco, and he found a similar rite and he described it, it is called treaty and doctrine of something like that, I think his name is Antonio de Villa Real this priest, and he registered he found a similar rite in Jalisco, and he described them as fierce men who had animals in their heads and long hair and they shouted moving their heads back and this is what he describes.

This means that this ritual was also done in other places because Mesoamerica was very big and in other parts they also identified with those rituals.

The punches had to do with the sound of the rain also?

Yes, and the rope they have also, have you seen the Tigers that have their rope and do those sounds of moaning, the tlacololeros also. This are the peasants of the city of Tenochtitlan that fled the conquest, and they were very poor, they only fed themselves with the products they obtained from the land, like maize, corn, pumpkin, so them they were part of the poorest peasants of all, because they did not have lands to make their crops, they had to clean the lands in the hills which are called Tlacolol, and this were the people who planted their crops in those inclined pieces of land, they were peasants of the poorest kind, so these people to avoid the animals that destroyed their crops they had to look after their crops day and night, because it was useless to grow these crops if the animals came later and ate everything, basically the mice. So this is why they are represented dressed with "costales" bags and their fierce and big heads, poor peasants. And their dance is also a propitiatory ritual because their ropes

imitate the thunder and they shout like thunder, also the way in which they hit themselves represent when the Tlacolol is being burnt before the planting season. In the ancient times there was a man played the flute, know he went and died in Topiltepec, the man that plays the flute, he died, so in a few years there were no tlacololeros, until one of my kinsmen did a party of the Holy Burial and in may they decided to get together and they went to look for another flutist in the town of Apango, he went like three years and he stopped playing so know there is a new gentleman, he is my nefew and his name is Urbano Terrero he started to practice and he is the one that comes each year, but sometimes they do not organize themselves and sometimes they do not call the flute player, but now there is someone who plays well he is called Urbano Terrero.

### Chanting to the Cross

Have you been there? You must have notes don't you ? Field work notes: you must be there in the mayor's house and see what they do, how many people go and how they prepare the food and organize the ritual preparations for the second and third of may. Since the first day of may is when the food is prepared to take into the mountain: tamales, chicken this is where they start to cook them.

### Trumpet band music

### Ladies preparing food in big pots

The preparing of the food is the first day of may to take the raw tamales into the mountain and they are cooked there, and the chicken are taken alive and they are killed up there when they are offered they kill them in order to shed their blood. Blood was very important for reproduction, the "temporal" is the rain water. In the ancient times, according to Sahagún, little children were taken up there in their fathers head and they were dressed and decorated with papers of different colors, in order to kill them in the mountain and when they started crying people were happy because their tears were like rain for them, it symbolized the rain, in the same way that when someone fights another one up there and they share their blood, this blood symbolizes the most precious liquid of all which was the rain.

So the preparation is on the first day of may to go up there and offer the people food like tamales, chicken broth, maize or corn, and then they go down to eat the pozole in the church, and then they prepare the food for the third day in the afternoon in Comulian, another mountain in the south of town where they do another ritual, these are our costumes. Sometimes we ask to be a mayor in order to serve the town or the community, or for a religious reason, in order to serve a saint, like from devotion. But nowadays they do not do that any more. They only want to be a mayor in order to make the rituals because they like to party or from the Conquest they do it for a prestige that it brings, they invite everyone, although some people do it with devotion for a Saint for example.

In nahuatl we say ninowenchíhuatl, which means I do an offering to this or that Saint

### Prayer chanting

Uncle can you tell us now what is the relationship between the ritual of the rain petition and the ritual of the offering of the Tomoxóchitl flower?

Well that was a later development, but in the olden times this was not present, it shows the masculinity of the man who gets it, because it grows in very high and risky places, in rocks and where there are snakes around in the trees, but these men go anyway and get the flowers to

give their girlfriends as a big offering, as a jewel of great value and when a girl receives this flowers of Tomoxóchitl it demonstrated who was going to get married with her, because he gave her the flower. Now there has been some trouble because some girls go out with two guys and then sometimes they quarrel to decides who gets the girl, but here is the girl who is to blame

So this is not an ancient tradition?

No, this was done later, in order to get together with the procession (which is really a part of the old tradition) so there is also a pre-Hispanic origin in this procession and in the cross itself, is not the crucifix of Christ the Lord, it is a female Cross, in Citlala is called Tonantzin (our little mother) Our mother the Cross, is feminine.

Prayers

In Acatlan they put a dress over the Cross, is called Tlaquentzin, is like a dress with embroidery in colorful shapes.

And today we can see that the girls also fight?

Well that is also something new, in the ancient times it was only the men who fought, the women did not participated

So what can be the reason that they are starting to fight nowadays?

Because of the liberation of women, now they are not so delicate, they have liberated themselves and they participate in all the rituals, there are also "maromeras" (the dancers of the "maromas" or jumps, now they even fight as tigers but this is now like a sport, in the olden days it was a ritual, nowadays everybody tries, who ever wants to do it, or whom ever has the courage they put on a mask and it is ready to fight, it has also been changing.

And what is the meaning of the bulls sacrifice?

Well the blood I told you about. The blood they take of the bull and they drink it as a precious liquid, the blood is part of the ritual as a pre-Hispanic heritage, since the Mexica-Tenochcas drank the blood of their sacrificed captives of war, now they do not drink human blood but the bulls blood, and the rite of the blood is ancient, is part of the success of the ritual and the success of what this ritual asks for, in this case: the rain. Yes, it is this way.

Girls drinking the bulls blood, trumpets and drums playing

End.