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**Nahua Blood Sacrifice and Pilgrimage to the Sacred Mountain  
Postectli, June, 2001**



**Research Year:** 2001

**Culture:** Nahua

**Chronology:** Pre-Columbian and Contemporary

**Location:** Huasteca, México

**Site:** Postectli

I want to begin by thanking FAMSI Board members, and FAMSI Advisory Board members for supporting this research effort. Without funds provided by FAMSI we would not have been able to go to the field. As you will see, the financial assistance allowed us to document for the first time a remarkable ritual pilgrimage and blood sacrifice firmly rooted in the pre-Hispanic era. I am extremely grateful to FAMSI for providing necessary funds on such short notice and I will certainly work to disseminate through publications and public presentations the ethnographic information that we gathered during the grant period.

We learned that we had FAMSI support for this emergency research project late in the afternoon on June 6, and we left for the field on June 10, 2001. The original grant was to support me and my wife Pamela for a 13-day stay in México to document and gather ethnographic data on the rare and unusual ritual event. In the two days we had for planning, we learned that our 18-year-old son Michael, who has accompanied us to the field since he was three years old, would be available to join us and we decided to give

him responsibility for photographing the event. This freed Pamela and me to conduct interviews, take detailed notes, and keep track of significant episodes in the ritual, many of which occurred simultaneously. We used our own funds to pay for Michael. In order to save money on flights we traveled by car to Atlanta, Georgia and flew to México from there. This strategy saved enough money to make up the difference between what we budgeted for and the actual amount of the Contingency Grant.

We arrived in México, D.F. on the morning of June 11 and were met at the airport by Jesús Ruvalcaba Mercado, a senior researcher at the Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social (CIESAS). I had e-mailed him that we were arriving and offered to have him accompany us to the field so that he could witness the pilgrimage and offering. We met for about two hours and learned that he was to leave the country on the next day and would not be able to join us. He was enthused about the project and encouraged us to continue our efforts to document cultural practices in the Huasteca region, one of the most indigenous and yet poorly understood areas in Mesoamerica. He is director of a multi-year research effort by CIESAS to send student fieldworkers to the Huasteca to gather information on the cultures of the region. Significant advances in documentation have resulted from this long-term, coordinated research effort. I am happy to report that my sustained fieldwork in this region spanning more than thirty years has been part of the impetus for this welcome endeavor.

We then picked up our rental car and departed for northern Veracruz, the site of our long-term research among Nahuas (Náhuatl speakers). We headed for the Sierra Madre Oriental and stopped in Xicotepec de Juárez in the Sierra Norte de Puebla for the night. On June 12 we traveled to Tuxpan, Veracruz, to purchase gifts and necessary supplies of food to take into the remote community where the ritual was to be held. I have conducted ethnographic research since 1970 in the Nahua community of Puyecaco, located in the municipio of Ixhuatlán de Madero northern Veracruz. The community has about 600 inhabitants who live through slash-and-burn horticulture. I have committed myself to long-term research in the village as a way of overcoming the notoriously closed nature of indigenous villages in the region (and in Mesoamerica as a whole). I have found that it takes years of residence before outsiders are permitted to witness and participate in aspects of Nahua life. As I mentioned in the memorandum of application, despite its importance to Nahua religious practices, we were first permitted to witness the pilgrimage and sacrifice only in 1998. Given the complexity of events and the symbolic richness of the altars, chanting, ritual music, sacred sites visited, and offerings dedicated we were able to document only a small part of the occasion at that time. Villagers actually contacted us through intermediaries to join them in the events of this June. It is our hope that the observations we made will lead to a new understanding of contemporary indigenous and pre-Hispanic religious beliefs and practices.

We entered the community of Puyecaco on June 13 and made arrangements to stay at the house of ritual kinsmen. I made contact immediately with Encarnación Téllez Hernández (known as Cirilo), the lead ritual specialist who was organizing the pilgrimage. I was surprised that only one helper was with him as they began the long process of cutting sheets of paper and folding them preparatory to cutting the sacred images of the relevant spirits. That day and the next (June 14) Pamela, Michael, and I

sat in the xochicali (shrine, literally "flower house") and helped fold the papers and tie them into bundles of twenty each. Shortly after our arrival, people from Puyecaco and from neighboring villages began to arrive to help with the preparations (see [photo 1](#) and [photo 2](#)).



**Photo 1. Nahua ritual specialists cut sacred paper images in preparation for the blood sacrifice and pilgrimage to Postectli. Encarnación Téllez Hernández (Cirilo) is shown holding candles in the copal incense smoke. Note the box containing the seed images on the altar behind the group.**

Nahua rituals and preparations for rituals go on day and night with no time for sleep. People may doze off for a few moments while engaged in some task but sleep deprivation is one of the necessary conditions of holding successful rituals. During the entire period, including the pilgrimage and the climb to the summit of the sacred mountain, musicians continuously played the ritual melodies on guitar and violin. The musical pieces are called "flower songs" (or xochisones in the Náhuatl-Spanish expression) and they are repetitive and hypnotic as the hours stretch into days and nights. While Michael photographed the proceedings (he took over 400 color slides), Pamela and I were able to ask questions of participants and document the sequence of events with much greater accuracy. I should mention that for the first two days in the village, temperatures rose above 100 degrees Fahrenheit and that even in the middle of the night they were well into the 90's. We spelled each other over the next several days so that we could get at least two hours of sleep at night while the others were keeping

tabs of the ritual. At seemingly random times throughout the day and night, ritual activity would increase followed by periods of relative quiet.



**Photo 2. Examples of two of the approximately 16,000 paper figures cut for this ritual.**

We were able to document all of the major events during the ritual. Let me briefly describe a few of these in order to convey the flavor of the occasion. On Cirilo's altar is a box made from tropical cedar. Inside is a collection of perhaps 60 paper figures representing the life force or spirits of the seeds that are planted in the milpa. Each figure is dressed in a cloth outfit and is decorated with tiny necklaces, earrings, hair combs, etc. During one episode, women opened the box and undressed the figures (see photo 3). They then took the clothing to wash in the arroyo. After the clothes were dry, the women dressed each figure again and carefully placed it along with the others in a sisal carrying bag. All of this activity was done in a slow and measured pace while the music played and individuals danced before the altar holding smoking copal incense braziers.





**Photo 3. Nahua women undress seed figures before washing the clothes in the arroyo. Note the dressed paper figure representing the sacred earth in front of a second box containing seed images. Pots of water flanking the image of the earth are offerings to the water spirit Apanchanej.**

In another episode participants cleaned the altar in the shrine and placed fresh palm and flower adornments on it. Cirilo and other ritual specialists who had joined him, along with a growing number of helpers, placed neat rows of paper images on decorated sheets called *petates* (sleeping mats). Several dozen of these mats were placed so that they completely covered the altar. In another episode, participants danced before the altar holding sheafs of palm and marigold adornments. Outside the shrine helpers set up an altar dedicated to the sun called *cruz afuera* ("outside cross" in Spanish). The arch over this altar was connected to the arch over the altar in the shrine by a flower-covered vine that stretched between them ("like a telegraph wire"). Later in the middle of the night, Cirilo moved outside of the shrine to lay out on the ground a complex array of paper images of various colors along with offerings of tobacco, cornmeal, soft drinks, palm and flower adornments, cane alcohol, bread, etc. Several ritual specialists holding sacred walking sticks, smoking incense braziers, or scissors used to cut the paper images stood around the array and all chant individually to disease-causing wind spirits in order to keep destructive forces at bay during the ritual offering that followed. The cacophony of their chanting temporarily overpowered the lilting sacred guitar and violin music that played continuously.

Several hours later the participants, who numbered about 75 at this point, moved inside the shrine where ritual specialists began the process of sacrificing a number of chickens and turkeys. This episode involved dancing, chanting, mock combat, force-feeding the victims cane alcohol and soft drinks, etc. At the height of the sacrifice, ritual specialists cut the throats of the birds and carefully sprinkled the blood on each of the hundreds of paper figures (see [photo 4](#)). The birds were later removed and cooked and eaten by participants as part of the overall offering. Later in the early morning a procession, including ritual specialists and musicians, visited a spring in Puyecaco and dedicated an offering, including bloody paper figures from the sacrifice, to the water spirit, Apanchanej ("water dweller" in Náhuatl) (see [photo 5](#) and [photo 6](#)). After they returned, the participants dedicated offerings to the outside cross altar (see [photo 7](#)).

During all of these and additional lesser activities that I have not mentioned, male and female ritual specialists continued to cut paper figures and make palm and flower adornments. In total, about 16,000 paper figures were produced, along with 3,000 palm and flower adornments. The paper figures not only had to be cut out but various parts such as eyes, mouth, and body features had to be folded open and the figure had to be placed carefully on the paper sleeping mats. On June 15, the three of us devoted ourselves to making hundreds of palm and flower adornments. It is absolutely crucial that participants in a ritual of this size contribute labor, money, and goods to the success of the overall enterprise. From the Nahua perspective, this is the only justification for being part of the ritual. Otherwise people would have questioned our presence and perhaps had us removed. We donated 1,200 pesos (about \$133.00 U.S.), regular candles, votive candles, and several days of labor to the highly repetitive tasks of paper folding and adornment making.

On June 16, after another night of ritual activity, we prepared for the pilgrimage. It rained the entire night before and I feared that the walk, not to mention the climb to the summit, would be made more difficult because of the muddy conditions. The object of the sacred journey is an ancient basaltic volcanic core that rises straight up nearly 2,000 feet from the surrounding countryside. It lies about 25 miles from Puyecaco near the Nahua town of Ichcacuatitla, Chicontepec, Veracruz. Postectli means "broken" in Náhuatl and the mountain is the subject of many myths and legends. It is one of the most striking geological features I have ever seen and it gives the appearance of having been broken off at the top. Near the summit are two caves, one the home of thunder spirits and the other the dwelling place of Apanchanej, the water spirit. At the peak, the Catholic Church has constructed a cross made from cement to symbolize the conquest of Christianity over the Native American religions. For the Nahuas, the summit is associated with Tonatij, the sun spirit. In an interesting case of syncretism, the Nahuas refer to the sun as Jesús, and they view the cross as a symbol of solar heat and power.



**Photo 4.** Ritual specialist sprinkles blood on paper figures laid on altar. The blood conveys *chichahualistli*, life force or power, to the spirits portrayed by the images.





**Photo 5. Participants make offerings to Apanchanej at a village spring. A man holds the sacred walking stick, representing thunder spirits, as another man opens soft drinks and beer and spreads the liquid before the spring. Colored ribbons attached to the stick represent the first rays of the morning sun. Note the cups of food and drink offerings placed near the spring. One man above the spring holds a lighted candle while shaking a rattle. Another rings a small bell to alert the spirits.**





**Photo 6. Several minutes later two walking sticks have been leaned against the opening to the spring and a carrying bag containing the dressed seed images has been placed nearby. Note the food and drink offerings dedicated to the water spirit.**

We had decided to have Pamela and Michael drive our rental car to Ichcacuatitla to avoid the long, tiring walk and to arrive in advance of the procession. The town can be reached by perilous dirt roads that had become quagmires because of the rain. Cirilo asked if they could take some of the supplies and offerings in the car so that people did not have to carry them. And so as we walked, Pamela and Michael drove the four and a half hours to Ichcacuatitla carrying 13 chickens, one turkey, all of the cut paper figures in a neat bundle half the size of a bale of hay, and other items deemed too heavy or awkward to carry conveniently. I chose to walk and document the pilgrimage itself in photos. We started out at about noon and arrived in the dark at 11:00 p.m. We were exhausted and dehydrated but were welcomed by about 50 people from the town. They had prepared food and drink and they helped us unload and store our ritual items in the local *xochicali*. Pamela and Michael had already arrived and had unloaded their sacred cargo with the help of townspeople.



**Photo 7. Ritual participants circumambulate the outside cross altar dedicated to the sun. Man on the left holds a sacred walking stick associated with thunder and rain. Smoke is copal incense. Note the vine with attached flowers that connects the outside cross with the main altar in the xochicali (shrine, literally "flower house").**

The walk took us cross country far from roadways (see [photo 8](#)). We passed villages and out-of-the-way settlements completely removed from urban amenities. The trail was difficult as it rose steeply and plummeted through valleys of the Sierra Madre Oriental. The mud made walking treacherous and the heat and humidity were stifling. We stopped briefly at springs and water holes where the ritual specialists left small offerings. We were led by a man who carried the beribboned walking stick that is the most sacred symbol of the Nahuas (see [photo 9](#)). Following at the rear, another man carried a miniature walking stick, thus setting off a moving sacred space. The walking stick is reminiscent of ones carried by the 12 thunder spirits who carry water from the sea (Gulf of México) to the cave on Postectli to be distributed to the fields by Apanchanej. As they pass overhead, they strike their sticks causing thunder and lightning. The colorful ribbons represent the light at sunrise. In addition to the walking sticks, women carried the dressed seed figures in sisal bags. Using a tumpline, others lugged carrying baskets filled with offerings. The procession consisted of 68 people ranging from children as young as ten years to women well into their seventies (see [photo 10](#) and [photo 11](#)). As we walked along it was remarkable to see people come from their houses bringing gifts of food, sugarloaf, flowers, and money so that we could

make use of them as offerings on the mountain. Some of the people had tears streaming down their faces as they presented us with the gifts.

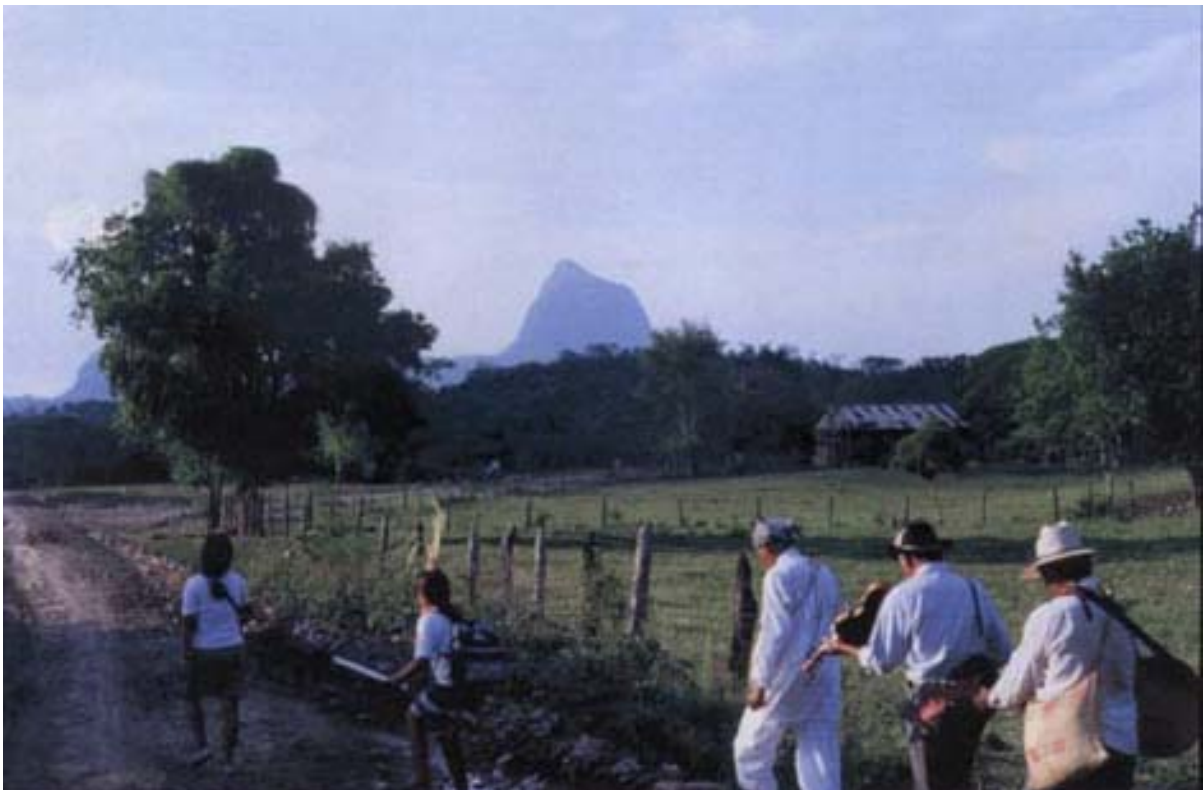


**Photo 8. The 68 pilgrims at the beginning of their walk to Postectli. Note the baskets that people carry containing offerings to the spirits.**



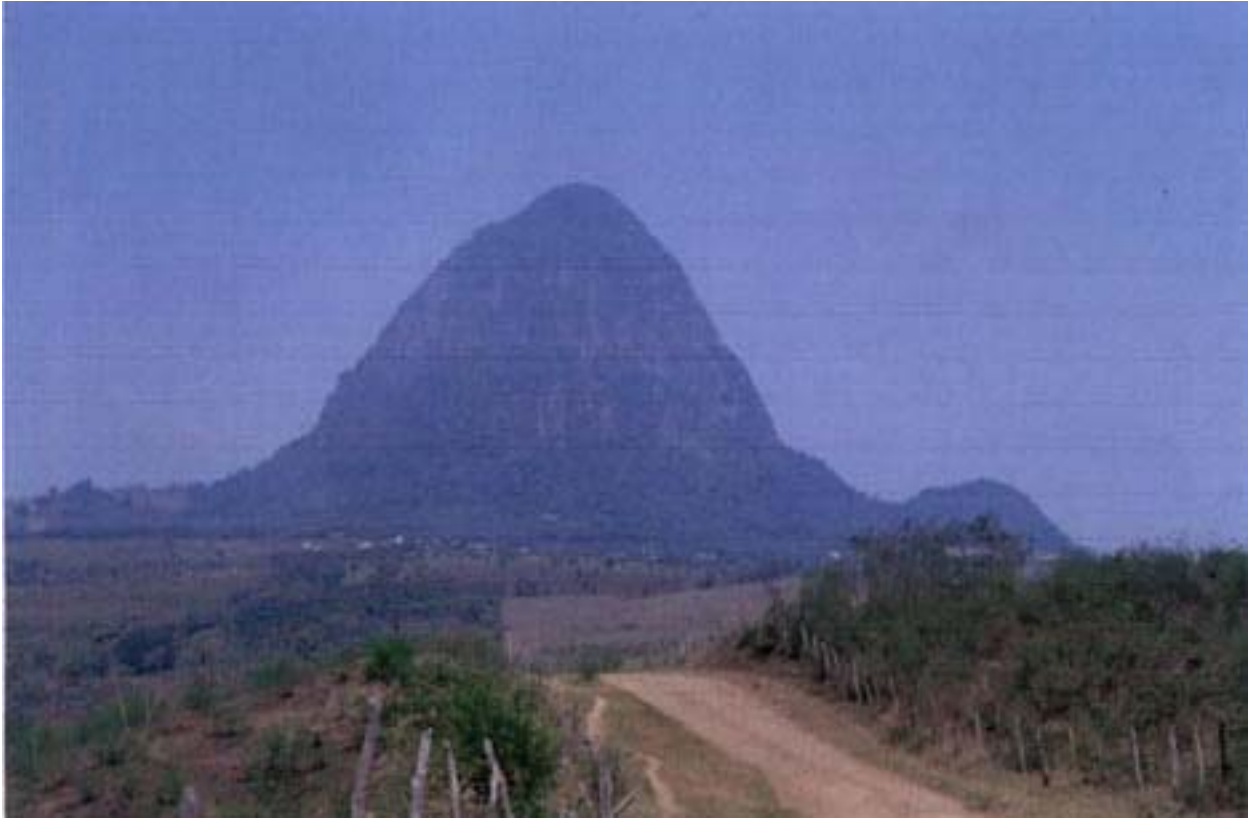


**Photo 9. Man at right holds walking stick before pilgrims as they walk to the sacred mountain.**



**Photo 10. Postectli looms several miles in the distance as the pilgrims approach their destination.**





**Photo 11. Clear view of Postectli from another vantage point.**



**Photo 12. Main altar in the shrine at the foot of Postectli. Note the square arch, decorated with palm and flower stars, that represents the sky realm. The table top containing the offerings and two boxes with seed images represents the surface of the earth. Beneath the altar table are offerings and candles dedicated to the earth itself.**

The pilgrims rested from their journey in the xochicali at the base of Postectli after eating the food prepared for them (see [photo 12](#)). No one had slept for days and it was clear that everyone was deeply exhausted. Still the ritual went on all night with chanting, dancing, music, and blood sacrifice on paper figures set on the main altar. The crowd numbered more than 100 people in the small building. Most were up dancing or chanting before the altar but some were slouched on benches along the sides of the room stealing short naps. The ritual specialists spent hours finishing the task of cutting paper figures and arranging the offerings. It was another sleepless night of ritual activity with everyone preparing themselves for the climb the next day.

Early on the morning of June 17, the ritual specialists chanted before the main altar and then moved outside where they laid out another array of wind spirits. Some of the figures were cut from white paper that had been blackened with charcoal from a fireplace. Helpers inserted lighted cigarettes into the paper figures' mouths as a tobacco offering. These images represented Tlacatecolotl (Owl Man) and his wife who are leading figures in Mictlan, place of the dead. The offering was to prevent these harmful entities from interfering with or benefitting from the rituals dedicated to the sacred hill (see [photo 13](#)). Following this ritual we loaded up the offerings and lined up for the walk

to the base of the mountain (see [photo 14](#) and [photo 15](#)). The town of Ichcacuatitla is situated beneath Postectli but access to the summit is about two kilometers around the base. The slope starts gradually but soon becomes perilously steep. The 68 pilgrims, now joined by Pamela and Michael, struggled up the slope made muddy and extremely slippery by the downpour that had occurred during the night (see [photo 16](#)).

About one-third of the way to the summit, Cirilo instructed everyone to rest at a flat place on the trail. There was an old altar structure built up against the mountain and helpers cleared the area and prepared to dedicate an offering. They laid out mats of paper figures, decorated the arch with palm and flower adornments, and created the beautiful space that defines a Nahua altar. Two chickens were sacrificed, their blood carefully spread on the paper figures (see [photo 17](#)). People danced before the altar as ritual specialists chanted and musicians continued to produce flower sounds on the guitar and violin. In one unusual episode, Cirilo and helpers entombed a live white chicken in a small depression in the rock face above the altar. The bird was buried alive with palm and flower adornments, soft drinks and beer, and other items as an offering to Mixtli, the cloud.

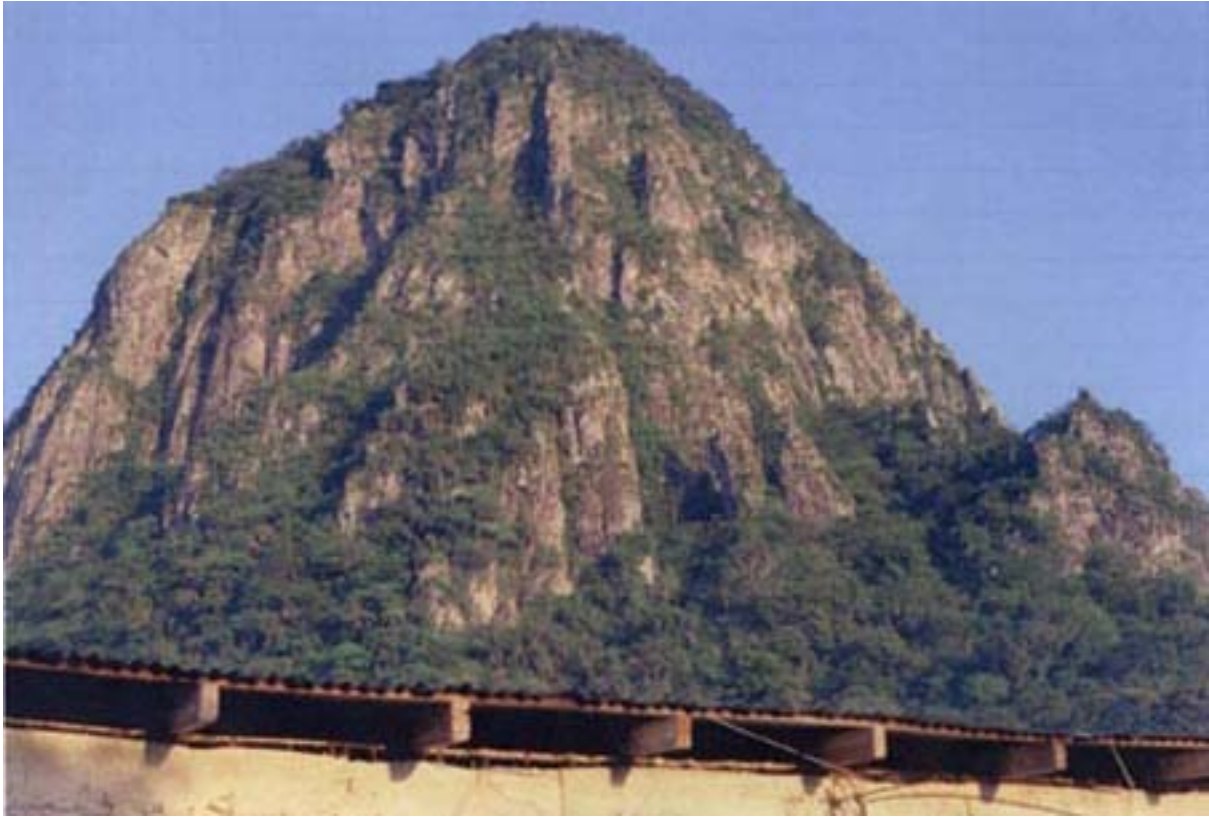
After about an hour of ritual activity, we loaded up the remaining supplies and proceeded up the rock face in an almost vertical climb. It was hand-over-hand climbing for the next several hours. Two areas were particularly difficult and helpers had laid 75-foot ropes so that we could pull ourselves up. At about three quarters of the way to the summit, we rested at another flat place and helpers immediately began to set up another altar. Paper figures received their blood offering as the participants danced and chanted before the decorated altar (see [photo 18](#)). A large paper image of Apanchanej dressed in a dark green dress and highly decorated with jewelry and ribbons (see [photo 19](#)) was paraded around standing in a clay pot. People put candles and coins in the pot for luck and religious merit.

A small contingent of pilgrims then proceeded up the mountain carrying offerings to a small cave where Apanchanej and the seed spirits dwell. There Cirilo knelt before the opening and chanted as helpers arrange offerings. Bloody paper figures on their paper sleeping mats were carefully placed in the cave entrance and the clay pot with the Apanchanej figure was passed around a final time so that people could toss coins in before it was placed in the little cave (see [photo 20](#)). A chicken was killed and tossed in the cave as a final offering. Most people returned to the place where the last altar was constructed but Cirilo and a few helpers made their way across the face of the mountain to yet another small cave that is the dwelling place of the thunder spirits. Here they dedicated an offering similar to that made to Apanchanej.



**Photo 13. The morning of the ascent, participants construct an altar to disease-causing wind spirits to remove them from the main offering and pilgrimage. Colored dolls represent the winds. Note the blackened figures with the cigarettes placed in their mouths. These represent Tlacatecoloti (literally Owl Man) and his wife, believed to be the leaders of dead souls in Mictlan (the underworld, literally "place of the dead").**





**Photo 14. View of Postectli rising above the roof of the shrine.**



**Photo 15. The pilgrims begin the ascent up Postectli.**



**Photo 16. On the trail to the summit of Postectli. Note the woman on the right carrying the copal incense brazier.**





**Photo 17. Blood sacrifice at the first stop on the trail to the summit of Postectli. Note the bloodied paper figures underneath of the altar. A man in the background holds candles and a walking stick.**





**Photo 18. The second stop in the trail showing the altar fully decorated, covered with offerings and lighted candles. Blood can be seen on the paper figures beneath the altar. Musicians continue to play the sacred music throughout the offerings and pilgrimage.**



Photo 19. Paper figure of Apanchanej, the water spirit, in dark green dress, jewels, and ribbons. This figure was left in the cave near the top of Postectli.



**Photo 20. Cirilo chants as he prepares to leave offerings and an image of Apanchanej in a cave near the summit of Postectli. Note offerings near the bottom of the photograph.**

After a brief pause, the participants loaded up the remaining items and began the almost vertical climb to the summit. When we arrived the people immediately began construction of four altars (see photo 21). The major one, on the western side of the summit, was dedicated to the cross. As mentioned, the cross represents the solar fire, the life-giving heat that animates the cosmos. Chickens were sacrificed and a major food offering was laid on top of the bloodied paper figures (see photo 22). Meanwhile, helpers were constructing a circular altar on the eastern side of the summit. They tied



string across the horizontal hoop to create a platform and place palm and flower adornments and offerings on it. This was an altar to the solar disk that travels across the sky each day and that changes its arc from season to season (see photo 23). Below and slightly to the south, helpers constructed an altar to the moon. Finally, helpers left a pile of pinwheel-like adornments before the cement cross. These items represented the stars that act as guardians over people when the sun disappears for the night.

After a short time, the people divided up the offerings and either consumed them on the spot or packed them in carrying bags to take back with them. We began the arduous descent and arrived at the bottom hours later. The ritual was officially ended and the people expressed happiness that their efforts had been a success and that the precarious balance between the spirit and human realms was restored. We returned to Puyecaco that evening. In the morning, I had a chance to talk to Cirilo about the pilgrimage and sacrifice and he was very pleased that everything had gone so well. He sat in his shrine, the location of so much activity in the previous days, with a lone incense brazier filling the space with aromatic copal smoke. Later he conducted a divination ritual by casting kernels of corn on a white cloth placed on the wooden box used to measure corn. He found that indeed everything was well received and that Apanchanej and her minions were quite satisfied with our efforts.

On June 18, we traveled to Tuxpan where we spent the night recovering from exhaustion, dehydration, sore muscles, and insect bites. The next day we traveled all day to the city of Veracruz for another night of recovery. On June 20, we arrived in Xalapa, Veracruz, and met with officials of the Institute of Anthropology of the University of Veracruz. We discussed plans to disseminate our findings and to include Mexican graduate students in our research in the Huasteca. On June 22, we drove to México City and dropped off the rental car. We had been invited that afternoon to view the contents of a stone box that was uncovered a year ago at the Templo Mayor in the heart of México City. The box was one of seven caches associated with stone steps that had been uncovered near the margins of the site during construction of an office building. The caches were put there by the Aztecs about 40 years before the Spanish invasion. Cache 102 contained organic remains and was of particular interest to us. In it were a priest's vestment made completely from paper. There were also statues of Tlaloc, the rain spirit, made from stone, copal incense, and rubber. Two pieces of cloth are some of the best preserved and most complete examples from the Aztecs. Among numerous other offering objects (numbering about 4,000 in total) were eight placards made from paper and edged on two sides with small sticks. Painted on these larger than postcard-sized pieces of paper were images of Tlaloc, somewhat resembling the paper figures that are so important to the Nahuas of the Huasteca. Here we have a stone box from the Aztec period filled with cloth, offerings, and fertility images on paper. The pre-Hispanic cache seems reminiscent of the wooden box found on the altars of Nahua ritual specialists that contain the seed spirits, with their cloth outfits, and offerings. I plan to investigate these remarkable Aztec artifacts to see what further conclusions can be drawn about their association with ritual practices that endure in the Huasteca region.





**Photo 21. Pilgrims temporarily rest as they reach the top of Postectli after a seven-hour climb. They begin to prepare an altar to the sun at the bottom right. Note the fields below the mountain on the upper left.**



**Photo 22. Cirilo prepares to sacrifice a fowl at the sun altar. Helper rings small bell to alert the spirits.**



**Photo 23. Circular altar dedicated to the solar disk. Note palm and flower adornments, offerings including beer and bread, and the paper figures on the altar itself.**

The pilgrimage and blood sacrifice have provided us with information on the religion and world view of contemporary Nahuas that is firmly rooted in the Pre-Hispanic past. Thanks to FAMSI we were able to gather a large body of ethnographic data on these beliefs and practices. When these data are integrated with the information we have



collected over the past 30 years, they will provide a much more complete picture of contemporary Nahua religion. The research will lead to a major monograph on this topic that I will begin working on this year. In the course of the research I plan to consult with ethnohistorians and archaeologists as well as other ethnographers. I view the project as an interdisciplinary effort in which ethnohistory, archaeology, and art history will provide the triangulation necessary to create new and better understandings of Mesoamerican cultures, both ancient and contemporary.

Again, thanks to FAMSI for supporting this research opportunity. It has been an incredible two weeks, physically and emotionally trying like much ethnography, but rewarding beyond all expectation.

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