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THE PILGRIMAGE OF FRENCH SPIRITUAL TOURISTS TO THE WELLSPRINGS OF MEXICAN NEO-SHAMANISM: AN INTERNATIONAL (AND INTERCONTINENTAL) BRIDGE

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Abstract: In this article, we will analyse a journey dedicated to the discovery of the ‘sources of indigenous knowledge’ undertaken in March 2009 by French people in a country unknown to them: Mexico. More specifically, we will look at their forms of participation in this journey organised by a shaman of Otomi origin called by the vernacular term of Bădi, i.e. “the shaman” in the Otomi language, by his followers. The aim of this trip is to enable them to discover the origins of shamanism, which the organiser links to the history of the indigenous people. In addition to visiting pre-Hispanic archaeological sites, the tour also includes a visit to Otomi country, which is presented as one of the centres of Mexican shamanism.

Keywords: Neo-shamanism; Spiritual tourism; Otomi, Mexico; Contemporary spiritualities

Introduction¹

New Age practices are of central importance in the current debate about the supposed disappearance or return of religion as a defining element of our modernity. If, through the process of the secularisation of Western society, institutional religion based on ecclesiastical organization has lost strength as a founding element in society itself, we observe at the same time that the need for spirituality in human beings is increasingly present and capable of permeating all spheres of existence. As Casanova brilliantly demonstrates in his article, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective” (Casanova, 2006), what we call secularisation is not an exit from the main door of the “religious” in society, but rather its reconstitution and permeability under other forms

allowed entrance through the secondary door of the “spiritual” that has been spreading to all latitudes since the Second World War. One of the common characteristics of the various contemporary spiritualities is the conceptualisation of the individual as the bearer of an infinite potential of possible transcendence, divorced from any form of historicized and structured religion. We see the emergence of new dynamic forms of spiritual research constituted as small groups or movements united by the same imagery and the same language, to the detriment of large-scale adherence to religious institutions such as major historical churches.

This vast cultural movement covers quite heterogeneous practices, which in turn emphasize bodily techniques, therapeutic practices not derived from allopathic medicine, and divinatory arts. There are some that are more body-related such as yoga or meditation, oracular systems such as astrology or tarot, and also alternative therapies including divination-related practices, reiki, aura-soma, neo-paganism and neo-shamanism.² The practices that claim to be part of the New Age movement all have, to varying degrees, certain unifying elements: the call for a quest of personal transformation, the sacralisation of nature, the predominant importance given to the body as a physical and emotional resource, the constant reference to cosmic energy, an Eastern spirituality presented as an inverted mirror of the West, the claim that all religious traditions draw from the same source, the presence in each person of an ‘inner-self’ to be developed, an interest in ecological discourse, the belief that a universal communion binds all individuals, and a certain distrust of allopathic medicine (Lombardi, 2018). Another element that all these practices have in common is the constant gaze towards a temporal ‘elsewhere’ that sees the source of all well-being in a mythical past. In order to make this benevolent and glorious gaze on past eras credible and acceptable to practitioners, it needs material supports that reify it and help give a physical dimension to what would otherwise remain as metaphysical descriptions or historical reinventions. With regard, above all, to the reconstruction and diffusion of exotic cultures, we will see in this paper how the more or less ancient monuments present in Mexico can become the means to legitimise a form of neo-shamanism conceived and structured for Western people as ‘traditional’. Historical antiquities serve both as a necessary archaeological presence to confirm discourses referring to cosmologies unknown to the participants, but also become

the material support for the creation and institution of new rituals that are constantly in flux.

Many of these groups and movements of the New Age are not really as “new” as the word might imply. In terms of intellectual history, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are pivotal for most of them; what is “new” is their conception of antiquity. This conception is always phrased in contemporary terms. “Antiquity” serves as a historical point of reference for them in the face of the challenges of the *present*, a means by which identity and ideas may be imbued with a sense of tradition, constructing “elaborate mytho-poetical narratives as bearers of ‘older,’ ‘hidden,’ ‘higher’ knowledge.” (Burns & Renger 2019).

Neo-Shamanic practices are presented in the contemporary West by their sympathizers as one of the means through which to discover a spirituality that defines itself as ancestral. Approaching this spiritual dimension, which is said to be common to all human beings, is likely to have therapeutic effects on the lives of their followers. Several forms of learning are proposed to explore these practices. Among the most widespread are books, residential seminars lasting a few days, festivals that bring together hundreds of interested people, and trips abroad to countries where shamanism originates. The latter offers a form of learning shamanism by presenting an exoticism linked to an elsewhere in space and time.

Since the 1960s, and more particularly at the heart of the emergence of the American counterculture movement, Mexico has become an important point of reference for those attracted by mysticism and the use of psychotropic substances as a means of access to understanding oneself and the world. One of the fundamental elements of the Beat Generation, in addition to social and political contestation, was a fascination with exotic mysticism, an area in which Carlos Castañeda’s writings (Traimond, 2000: 96) about his encounter with the Yaqui shaman Don Juan Matus are authoritative. Mexico, with its endemic variety of psychotropic plants, also enjoyed international success thanks to the practices of Maria Sabina, a woman of modest origins from Huautla de Jimenez in the Sierra Madre Oriental who was an expert in the therapeutic use of certain hallucinogenic mushrooms. Maria Sabina achieved worldwide fame thanks to the interest aroused by famous musicians who, in the sixties, made a pilgrimage to her to experiment

with powerful local hallucinogens. “This Mazateque woman, who died in 1985, is a *chon chine* (literally woman of knowledge or, for foreigners, shaman), who became world-famous in the 1970s” (Demanget, 2007: 28).

More recently, Mexico has become fashionable again through the international media because of the prophecy of the Mayan calendar of the year 2012 which announced the end of the world (Campion Vincent, 2015). Mexico is one of the countries that continues to fascinate our contemporaries with its mysticism and the exoticism of its practices. It remains a privileged destination for many travellers in search of shamanism as “living proof of authentic Indianness” (Basset, 2011: 225).

In this article, we will analyse a journey dedicated to the discovery of the ‘sources of indigenous knowledge’ undertaken in March 2009 by French people in a country unknown to them: Mexico.³ More specifically, we will look at their forms of participation in this journey organized by a shaman of Otomi origin called by the vernacular term of Bădi, i.e. “the shaman” (in the Otomi language, by his followers.) The aim of this trip was to enable them to discover the origins of shamanism, which the organizer links to the history of the indigenous people. In addition to visiting pre-Hispanic archaeological sites, the tour also included a visit to Otomi country,⁴ which is presented as one of the centres of Mexican shamanism. Moreover, this journey to the roots of shamanism should lead each person to access the “roots of oneself” in order to find the sources of a common spirituality that would link him/her to humanity and at the same time to acquire the knowledge necessary for the development of his/her own spirituality. Generally speaking, the practice of travel as a means of exploring both the elsewhere and the interior is based on a rhetoric which sees, in an element of culture, the representation of the whole and the reification of culture itself. Travel appears as a device which, by presenting an entire country through shamanism alone, makes it a key to reading the entire history of Mexican society and Mexico in general. If the trip promises to be the discovery of a marvellous country, rich in the magic of shamanism, the participants will nevertheless be constantly put to the test (Charuty, 1990: 12) with regard to what they personally expect from the organizer and the course of the trip itself.

Negotiations or how to stay on in controversial field-work

The experience of shamanic tourism to discover indigenous knowledge that is supposed to be authentic and ancestral is one of the various ways in which Westerners approach these forms of contemporary spirituality. The analysis of this trip to Mexico composes part of the multi-sited research terrain on which the doctoral thesis in anthropology defended by the author in 2016 in Paris is based. This was a lengthy multi-sited fieldwork. Having contemporary spiritual practices as a field of research means constantly following the steps and dynamics of these groups of followers who are permanently experimenting with different spiritual forms. Contemporary research terrains move away from the single sites and local situations of conventional ethnographic research designs to examine the circulation of cultural meanings, identities and relationships in a contracted time and diffuse space. The new epistemological challenges of the discipline are being tested by ever-shorter fieldwork moments condensed into a few days with actors perceived in the immediacy of their actions. The academic world has changed and with it the way of doing research. Following the cruel motto 'publish or perish', it is no longer possible for academic researchers to imagine being absent from the academic arena for months or years to carry out field research in distant and/or 'exotic' countries; now it is short, intense, complex and layered. As Marcus (1995: 99) puts it: "Among anthropologists, the move toward multi-sited ethnography might give rise to three sets of methodological anxieties: a concern about testing the limits of ethnography, a concern about attenuating the power of fieldwork, and a concern about the loss of the subaltern".

The researcher already knew the organizer of the event, the Bădi, from having taken part in his seminars in France to understand the diffusion and interest of neo-shamanic practices in contemporary French society. The Mexican man, with the help of some French followers, set up a non-profit association (Law, 1901) that allowed him to work in France. So, as far as we can tell, this man worked in France at least until 2015, organizing seminars, with the aid of supporters, about the nature of shamanic teachings. During these seminars lasting several days, information was provided about the activities organized in Mexico in which anyone could participate.

The first meeting with the Mexican shaman (Diego)⁵ took place in 2007 in Paris during the presentation of the activities of a French neo-shaman (Jessica) who was offering seminars and retreats in the forests of southern France during which the Mexican man and the French woman dispensed their knowledge to a Western audience (Lombardi, 2022).

The anthropologist's participation in this trip in 2009 took place after a long negotiation with the shaman. Both the shaman and the group of participants were aware of my work as a researcher in anthropology, but the relationship with the man soon became difficult. Initially, the shaman welcomed the presence of an anthropologist during his seminars, in which the researcher participated at the same level as the other participants. However then the situation became more complex when the shaman seemed to be at the centre of a network of slanderous rumours about him in France, and the anthropologist's presence during his trip to Mexico was interpreted as a kind of 'spy' intent on exposing him. The Mexican man will not deny the anthropologist the opportunity to participate, but will ask her for more money than the other participants and will be less willing to collaborate than in previous months. Research in this type of terrain does not involve a position of externality on the part of the researcher. Therefore, the anthropologist becomes part of the relational dynamics like the other members of the group, with all the doubts, uncertainties and ambiguity that this type of research implies. From an epistemological point of view, field research in contemporary spiritualities is based on the continuous repositioning of the anthropologist's gaze, which oscillates between participant observation and critical gaze. It is a quest where oxymorons meet by assuming the aspect of the couple of the ethnologist and his informant: the naive scholar and the learned native (Albera, 2001: 9). In this case, the relationship with the informant takes on a different density since our interest was in understanding the practices "for themselves" and therefore the informant was actually an entity composed of both the group of French tourists and the shaman. Within this chimerical entity several often discordant voices will be raised, bringing out doubts and uncertainties that are a fundamental part of the process of adherence to this type of practices.

From the announcement in the virtual world to the reality of the Indigenous University

In the autumn of 2008, the announcement of the “Ceremony of the 8,000 Sacred Drums for the Healing of Mother Earth” began to be broadcast on the internet, blogs, and other sites dealing with spirituality. On the French site, www.soleil-levant.org, the information published on October 30, 2008 allows one to appreciate the scope of this journey planned for the equinox of March 2009:

Ceremony of the 8,000 Sacred Drums for the healing of Mother Earth and for peace. Gathering in March 2009 with the Otomi Toltecs. It is a very ancient people, descended from the first humanity, says its mythology, which challenges us. The elders of the Otomi people, settled in the valleys and mountains of the Mexico City region, have kept the memory of their oral traditions from the Olmec, Toltec and Teotihuacan lineage. According to the Otomi, ancestral sacred ceremonies help to balance the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual body, but also the whole environment, families and communities, the planet and the energy of the cosmos. XXX, spiritual leader of the Otomi Toltec people, is one of the spokespersons for the defence of the rights of indigenous peoples worldwide, notably at the UN, WIPO (World Intellectual Property Organization) and the OAS (Organization of American States in Washington) and president of the YYY Association in France. Founder of the International Indigenous University, ambassador for peace and initiator of the 8,000 Drums Ceremony, he travels around the world to spread the teachings of the ancestral Toltec tradition. The 8,000 Drum Ceremony is a global gathering for the healing of Mother Earth, for Peace and for the Joy of Living.

Early studies and classification of the Otomi population include Jacques Soustelle who in 1937 charted this ancient and multifaceted civilization that was defined by linguistic criteria. “The Otomi-Pame family is divided as follows: Otomis, Mazahuas, Matlaltzincas or Prindas, and Ocuiltèques, Pames, Chichimèques. The Indians use a linguistic criterion to distinguish the various populations with which they come into contact” (Soustelle, 1937: 3-4).

Participants are responsible for organizing and choosing the date of their plane trip. Thus, everyone arrives during the first week according to their individual schedule. In the months leading up to the equinox in March 2009, the association chaired by the shaman sent out the programme for the trip to Mexico. The focus of the trip was the Ceremony

of the 8000 Sacred Drums on 21 March, followed by a series of excursions to the sacred sites of the Otomi culture. The duration of the trip could be 2 or 3 weeks, depending on the decision of the participants. The cost of the 2-week trip was €1,800, not including the flight. This included accommodation and food at the Universidad Indígena, ceremonies and entrance fees to the archaeological sites.

The first to arrive and settle into the premises of the Universidad Indígena (Figure 1) were five French women: Claude, Aurélie, Sylvie, Jeanne and Anne. A young Frenchman, Paul, who is an apprentice shaman acting as secretary to the Bădi, was also present, as was a Mexican nurse from Mexico City named Lourdes. They will take part in the trip.



Figure 1: Universidad Indígena. Source: Denise Lombardi.

- Aurélie, who comes from Brittany, is 28 years old and is a young woman with long black hair, smiling and cheerful; she has worked with children for a long time and is currently training to become a massage

therapist. I had met Aurélie at a workshop held by the shaman in February 2008 in Paris in the flat of a painter-therapist of Cherokee origin.

- Claude, a yoga teacher, is fifty years old. She lives in Montpellier and has a teenage daughter. She met the neo-shaman in the summer of 2006 during a seminar she attended with her whole family; she remembers that at that time he was much wilder and more folkloric than today. In 2006, he showed up with long hair that fell to the middle of his back, and bells attached to his ankles tinkled vigorously with every step he took.

- Jeanne and Louise, long-time friends and colleagues in the same office of a large manufacturing company, have been retired for a few years and come from Montpellier; both women attended the conference given by the shaman in Pau (Pyrénées-Atlantiques) for the winter solstice.

- Sylvie, a woman of almost sixty, asked for unpaid leave from the pharmaceutical laboratory for which she had worked for over twenty years in the vicinity of Paris. She made the request after a serious health problem with her spine, which forced her to stay in bed for several months. After several physiotherapies, she recovered physically, but the forced stop was a sign for her to review some important things in her life. She decided after the ordeal that she had to deal with her inner self first, and that the illness had certainly been an important signal from her body. She had read about the trip to Mexico through the Internet.

The heterogeneous choices that have led the women to embark on a pilgrimage to discover what they consider to be true Mexican shamanism are part of an experiential path made up of readings, participation in seminars and exchanges on social networks, which constitute a circuit within which to mark their steps. "Far from being random combinations, the itineraries constitute circuits. The circuit is defined as a pattern of the distribution and articulation of establishments that allow the exercise of sociability by regular users, which does not necessarily imply spatial contiguity, but does imply an articulation by typical practices" (Gutiérrez Zúñiga, 2008). Tourists in search of the exotic sacred are part of a symbolic and economic market that is based on the constant movement of people and goods according to a transnational social and economic model.

As happens at other latitudes, we are witnessing an economy of performance capable of generating figures suited to the Western imagination, such as the shaman in our case or the warrior (to cite one example among many) for the Maasai culture (Salazar, 2009). The presence of the shaman for tourists evidences how the self-exploitation of one's own culture—"being-themselves-for others"—predominates where few economic alternatives prevail (Bruner & Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1994, in Salazar, 2009: 64).

Throughout the stay, other travellers would join the initial small group for a few days or for a visit. This was the case of an American family, consisting of a mother, father, and teenage daughter⁶ we met during the Ceremony of the 8000 Sacred Drums who joined the group for a couple of excursions in the following days, just as another traveller of French nationality we met during the equinox who followed three stages of the shamanic journey and then continued his exploration of Mexico. The five French women, who were between thirty and sixty years old, did not know each other. They had already followed various shamanic training courses and are all from the southwest of France. The small group is housed at the *Universidad Indígena*, located in the suburbs of Toluca in the State of Mexico, in accommodation offering only basic comfort. Although the shaman presents this residence as a structure frequented by students where he gives shamanism classes to his compatriots, the building is, in reality, temporary accommodation. The University is an unfurnished, two-storey building under construction. There is only one classroom with a few chairs, a bookcase with some books of poems written by the shaman and some articles from French newspapers featuring him. There are no students and no teachers other than the shaman. The French group stays in the rooms of the university, where there are mattresses on the floor to sleep on. During the trip, meals are provided by Señora Berenice, the cook who is always busy preparing tortillas, guacamole, chicken and other refreshment. This very shy young woman, mother of four children and facing economic difficulties, will be practically the only local woman with whom the small group will have contact. During the long pauses, while waiting for the shaman to arrive, she recounts her husband's various unsuccessful attempts to migrate to the United States and talks about the difficulties of daily life in a country like Mexico. We will see her collecting leftover dinner for her family. Aurélie,

Claude, Sylvie, Jeanne and Louise will become attached to Berenice and her family, leaving them, before their return to France, some of their warmest outfits, or modest gifts to thank them for their work and the little bits of life they shared.

French tourists will often complain to each other about the spartan accommodation, the unvarying menu (rice, *aguacate*, chicken) and the shaman's constant delays. Doubts about his real shamanic abilities will be raised on a few occasions. All this will contribute to create a climate of uncertainty and opacity in the relational dynamics of the group. The shaman does not reside in the building, but spends every morning picking up the small group with his wife, who is also a shaman, and their daughters who will also be travelling. The first few days under his direction are devoted to the construction of a *temazcal*, or sweat lodge, in the vicinity of the Otomi Ceremonial Centre where the 8,000 Drum Ceremony will take place on the day of the spring equinox.

The Otomi Ceremonial Centre and the 8,000 Drum Ceremony

On March 21, 2009, the small group arrived before dawn at the summit of Temoaya where the Otomi Ceremonial Centre is located (Figure 2) and from where the shaman will celebrate the "Ceremony of the 8,000 Drums for the Healing of Mother Earth".



Figure 2: Otomi Cerimonial Centre. Source: Denise Lombardi.

From nine o'clock in the morning, the ceremonial centre slowly began to welcome more people. Otherwise, this park is a popular location for the general population; for instance, families with children who come for a Sunday picnic and groups of noisy teenagers with their footballs or stereos. At ten o'clock, the shaman opened the ceremony. Dressed in white, with a proud look on his face and long hair held in place by a decorated headband, he stood in the centre of the amphitheatre facing an inferno on which the copal, a local resin that exhales a scent similar to that of incense, was burning. The deep sound of the *caracol*⁷ resounded, and then, standing, the shaman began to play vigorously on a large drum one metre high. His wife and daughters, dressed in the traditional costume of *chinquete*, *faja* and *blusa* (Galinier, 1979: 272-273) and each with a drum, were at his side. The shaman then took the microphone. He referenced the first great meeting of all the indigenous spiritual leaders that took place at the Otomi Ceremonial Centre in the 1990s (Galinier & Molinié, 2006: 276-287). Additionally, he introduced himself as *Jefe del pueblo* Otomi, the spiritual leader of the people and spokesman of the prophecy of the 8,000 sacred drums according to which on the day they all gather to play together the healing of Mother Earth will occur.

There are about two hundred drums at this location. Many of the participants have come with their own instruments and when the shaman invites them to walk in a circle while they play, thuds rise and set the rhythm of their steps. The day is divided between the political demands of the shaman, which echo the more religious demands for the re-appropriation of the Ceremonial Centre as a sacred place for the Otomi. At the same time, in the vast grounds of the Ceremonial Centre, the many participants also enjoy the care provided by a group of *Castañedians*. To explain this self-ascribed term, they are followers of the anthropologist and novelist Carlos Castañeda who, together with the anthropologist and shaman Michael Harner, contributed to the creation and diffusion of neo-shamanism in the contemporary West (Lombardi, 2016). The group of *Castañedians* proclaim themselves as the true bearers of the Mexican shamanic tradition. Outside the amphitheatre, groups dressed in white carry out ritual purifications, called *limpias*, using incense released from the ceramic *sahumerio*⁸ that everyone has at their disposal. The *Castañedians* organize trips to the desert of northern Mexico to perform rituals using peyote (a hallucinogenic cactus), and in their opinion there

are too many people in Temoaya to honour the equinox. The leader is a tall, thin, blond, blue-eyed man in his fifties, wearing jeans and a thick wool jumper to keep out the cold, a red bandana on his head and a Texan-style hat, and reptile-skin boots. His name is Franck and he quickly explains that their philosophy is based on the true Mexican traditions and not on the tourist attractions offered by other shamans, indicating ours with a nod. Carlos Castañeda is reputed to be a true shaman, a *sabio* with supernatural powers. Suddenly the man turns his attention to other people. Next to him is his son, who leaves me his e-mail address in case I want to follow them on the pilgrimage that will take place in the next few days, in the north of the country, on the route of the *peyoteros*, to *Castañedian* holy places (Figure 3).



Figure 3: Castañedians. Source: Denise Lombardi.

The large *Castañedian* group comes alive with the presence of ten priestesses, responsible for the purifications. The women, who are between thirty and fifty years of age, wear long white dresses, long black hair tied back with coloured cloth, hair and make-up. Each woman has a smoking *sahumerio*, which she holds in both hands. In front of each woman is a small line of people waiting impatiently for their turn. In the audience there are people of all ages, children, adults and some people

in wheelchairs. When it is her turn, the woman approaches and lifts the *sahumerio* high, says a few words in a low voice and shakes the *sahumerio* around the person's body. After a few minutes, the purification session ends with a long embrace between the priestess and the now purified person.

While some of the priestesses continue the purifications with the *sahumerio*, others begin to perform massage and friction sessions by placing their hands on the bodies of the participants. An American man next to me is being treated: the first phase is the diagnosis; the woman asks him to lie down on the floor and then she walks on his back. Then there is a more therapeutic phase: the man sits on the floor and she vigorously massages his shoulders, with particular emphasis on the spine. After the treatment, he is asked if he has any problems with his knee, and the man testifies that in a few months he will have to undergo an operation for a problem with his cruciate ligaments, which have been causing him pain for several years. The astonished man thanked the woman warmly and made arrangements to join the group of *Castañedians* for some stages of their journey to the desert.

In the same space of the Ceremonial Centre, several shamans meet in front of a large audience fascinated by practices that are said to be ancestral. Through the sharing of a public space, we can observe the performance of the so-called traditional culture (Bortolotto, 2011) necessary to reinvent traditions or to revitalise obsolete practices that are regaining strength in a dimension that is more spectacular than cultural.

In the centre of the sumptuous ceremonial space, the shaman speaks on his own behalf and on behalf of the people he represents. He gives a speech in which fraternity and the healing of the earth that becomes Mother Earth take on a tone that is both political and ecumenical.

At the beginning of the afternoon, the shaman stops playing and the small group moves to the *temazcal* located beyond the fence that surrounds the park of more than eighty hectares. The *temazcal* was built for a steam bath session. Made from plant material, it is dome-shaped and has a diameter of about 6 metres; its walls are made of roughly twisted shrubs tied together, and the roof is covered with plastic sheeting, branches, and foliage. Meanwhile, a large fire has been lit. It will be used

to heat the stones which will then be placed inside the *temazcal* and on which water will be poured to release clouds of hot steam.

All the participants have prepared themselves for this and are in short trousers, t-shirts and/or underwear. They enter the *temazcal* for the steam bath. Inside, the space is cramped. French women and other people take their places, sitting in the darkness in the smoke produced by the stones on which the shaman throws water several times, with dried herbs also placed on the stones, spreading a pungent smell.

The shaman and his wife are sitting near the heat source. He speaks to her in French about the healing powers of herbs, the benefits of this ancestral purification tradition, the knowledge of nature passed on for generations by the ancestors he calls *los Abuelos*, and the importance of the Otomi people in Mexican history. For a long time, he explains, they resisted the settlers and refused to learn their language. His wife explains in Spanish:

The *temazcal* has always been a fundamental part of our traditions. Today's women use it as a remedy for all kinds of illnesses. Our ancestors, used *temazcal* after giving birth. The women who had given birth, would stay in the *temazcal* for forty days after the birth of their child with the help of older women who would give them potions with herbs to shrink the uterus. Entering the *temazcal* means entering Mother Earth, into its depths through which one can find its roots; it is a return to the womb of the earth, a return to the womb of the mother.

The temperature exceeds fifty degrees, the steam bath session ends.

The construction of an element belonging to the Mexican tradition such as the *temazcal*, in a public space like the ceremonial centre, causes friction between the different local actors. Not far from the sweat lodge, a worker takes care of the centre's maintenance. He knows the shaman personally by his Mexican first and last name, XX. The worker explains that until a few years ago, the *Bädi* was a man of the people, someone like them, "*a simple hombre*". But one day he decided to devote himself to his new activities and since then he has moved away. He started to travel and then he brought tourists to the ceremonial centre. This worker gives little credit to the shaman, because it seems clear to him that this *Bädi* is working for his own interests. He believes that the ceremony should be reserved for the Otomi people alone, but notes, paradoxically, that the centre only welcomes a small number of natives. The shaman does not

invite them to take part in a ceremony which is theirs and which should take place in accordance with tradition. The words of the worker confirm the analysis of the anthropologist Jacques Galinier (2010: 359) who highlights the difficult relations between the local population and neo-Indians who share the same space, but appropriate it in an antinomic way: the former are relegated to the role of subordinates, constrained by the increasingly hegemonic logic of the contemporary economy; the latter, the “neo”, are inserted into a process of re-patrimonialisation of a mythified past with a view to being its actors and not allowing themselves to be dominated by this same economic logic.

The space of the Otomi Ceremonial Centre becomes the emblematic place of the complex relationship between locals and Neo-Indians. When we arbitrarily speak of Neo-Indians (Galinier & Molinié, 2006), we refer to a large part of the population of what were considered the different souths of the world, that is, the countries colonised since the discovery and conquest of the Americas.

1492 has remained in the historical memory of Western Europe and the Catholic Church as the watershed event that marked a before and after in human history. In addition to expansionist and economic reasons, what emerged in the European culture of the time was “that the work of civilisation of those ‘savages’ or ‘new barbarians’ who inhabited the obscure world to the antipodes, was closely connected with their Christianisation” (Cantù, 2007: 10). At that time a colossal operation of conversion and above all of spiritual conquest was formulated, resetting the pre-existing forms of idolatry to zero in order to establish the new religious norms that were indispensable to justify enslavement, political domination and moral condemnation. Over the centuries, the Indian has been relegated to the margins of the social system. More recently, over the last twenty years, thanks to the shifting of world balances, the cultural rearrangement of the peripheries with respect to the centre, and the publication of motivational novels inspired by exotic and/or invented traditions, taking on the social and relational skills to be considered Neo-Indians. In this, they take on an ascribed capacity to offer an exotic and convincing response to the spiritual needs of a West adrift and unable to manage the social challenges imposed by contemporaneity.

Amerindian Architectures to feel energies (Teotihuacan)

The programme of the trip includes a visit to the archaeological site of Teotihuacan, which is more than forty kilometres north of the capital. On the eve of departure, impatience is palpable. The women choose their clothes carefully and, on the advice of the shaman, favour light-coloured clothing. Jeanne shows me a pair of trousers and a white linen blouse that she will put on for the first time the next day. She bought them for the occasion in France, for a few euros. Although she finds them very beautiful, she says she will never dare to wear them in the town where she lives. In spite of her clothing, which does not represent this woman in her daily life, she prepared herself mentally before leaving by assiduously doing yoga. The clothes used have a far from anodyne function within the ritual dynamic of the pilgrimage. “Indeed, there are good reasons to believe that their affected or playful aesthetics constitute a coherent dynamic at the basis of their functioning” (Houseman, 2016).

As Houseman has shown, contemporary rituals are characterized by a peculiar organization of link between actions and dispositions with respect to the performance of the ritual itself. If during the “classical” rituals attention is focused on “the pursuit of conventionally stipulated forms of behaviour”, in the contemporary rituals he characterises as “refracting”, the focus is shifted to “an equally conventional emulation of what are held to be exemplary emotional and intentional qualities” (Houseman, 2011: 262). In order to succeed in the pernicious intent of submitting one’s subjectivity to the emotions to be felt during the ritual, a whole series of individual actions is carried out, including the ambivalent choice of clothing, which represents but at the same time distances the person from herself.

For Jeanne the visit to Teotihuacan represents the climax of the trip. In the early morning, she declares before the arrival of the shaman:

I feel more and more ready. We are going to a high place, full of energy, it will be powerful. I saw a documentary on the ruins of Teotihuacan. It’s wonderful. I came all the way to Mexico to see the Great Pyramid of the Sun and to be surrounded by its energy. Because we know that shamanism is feeling it!

Departure will be around noon and the group will arrive at the majestic Teotihuacan complex (Figure 4) at around 3 pm. The ruins, whose ceremonial centre experienced its golden age at the end of the

Second century BC, are situated 2,200 metres above sea level. The site is built on two perpendicular axes, one terrestrial and the other aquatic. The buildings are spread over a huge avenue known since the XIX century as the “Alley of the Dead”. It crosses the San Juan River, whose bed has been diverted so that it crosses the Alley of the Dead perpendicularly from east to west. Three great architectural complexes dominate the site: to the north, the Rio San Juan, the Pyramid of the Moon, and the Pyramid of the Sun; to the south of the Rio San Juan is the Citadel. The Pyramid of the Moon facing south closes the perspective of the Alley of the Dead. It is made up of four stone blocks stacked on top of each other and is 140 metres wide. The Pyramid of the Sun has an even more massive shape; facing west, it is 225 metres long and over 60 metres high. Excavations by the Mexican archaeologist Eduardo Matos in 1993 revealed that the Pyramid of the Sun was originally surrounded by a wide moat filled with water. In Nahuatl, the dominant language of pre-Hispanic Mexico, “city” is called *altepetl*, literally water, mountains. The Pyramid of the Sun evokes a mountain surrounded by water: a symbol of the city.



Figure 4: Teotihuacan complex. Source: Denise Lombardi.

The group gathers around the Pyramid of the Sun, also known as the Temple of the Sun. Before climbing the 365 steps of the pyramid, the shaman explains to the group:

Teotihuacan is one of the most powerful places for humanity because the Sun represents male energy and the Moon represents female energy. We will climb the 365 steps that lead up to the Temple of the Sun and it will be a healthy journey for everyone. Everyone will have to make the journey alone and in full consciousness, and stop at each step with the element to be healed clearly in mind. You will see that, once you reach the top of the temple, something will change in your life, and you will be able to appreciate the results. Your whole life will be transformed. It is a powerful ascent, both physically and psychically.

The company begins to climb the steps of the pyramid. They are high and slippery because of the rain. The *Bādi* climbs them with agility. When he reaches the top, he takes a small cloth carpet, the *caracol*, the drum and two small ceramic cups in which the incense will be burned out of his bag. He blows vigorously into the *caracol*, turning toward the four cardinal points. Then he kneels down, his forehead on the ground, sprinkles the place with the smoke from the incense and starts beating the drum in rhythm. He plays for ten minutes towards the north, blows into the instrument, turns to the east, plays the drum for about ten minutes and so on until he returns to the starting position facing north. A small group has gathered around him and is watching as he raises his hands in a prayer posture, palms open to the sky.

At the end, the group descends from the pyramid and continues the visit by walking among the ruins of the site. The women unanimously affirm that the energy felt at the top of the pyramid was stronger than ever,⁹ but as is often the case, the events do not present themselves exactly as they had imagined before the journey. Some are disappointed by the short time available to them. Jeanne confides:

When we were at the top of the pyramid, I had shivers all over my body, I felt the warmth of the stones rising from the bottom to the top to reach my solar plexus. We were in connection with the Great Spirit. I felt it. I was in deep connection with myself. When I went up the stairs it was like when I was little and went to the village church with my grandmother. The church was just a little chapel on top of a rock and the people of the village had carved steps in the stone. For me, it was majestic and I was even afraid of slipping. I was very small and my hands got lost in my grandmother's old hands... what sweetness to return to

those days with the same shivers here in Mexico, what beauty. But I would have liked to enjoy it a little more. I would also have liked to visit the Pyramid of the Moon, which is rich in feminine energy, and also to take a little walk in the site's museum; but well, that's how it is [...] better to be thankful for everything we've had, rather than to complain unnecessarily.

Women find themselves once more stuck in a reciprocal testing of unstable relationships between states of doubt and belief (Charuty, 2013: 86) in the face of this unknown shamanic universe. The fact of being constantly taken to a dimension characterized by uncertainty with regard to the capacities of the shaman elicits the interpretative anxiety which allows them to reveal intimate and repressed contents which prove to be necessary to rebuild one's relationship with oneself (Foucault, 1984: 89).

Archaeological remains: Malinalco

One day was dedicated to the discovery of the pre-Hispanic ruins of Malinalco. Malinalco and its historical ruins are in the State of Mexico, about 70 km from Toluca. Upon arrival in Malinalco, the Mexican man buys tickets and the group begins to climb the three hundred and eighty steps leading to the top of the pyramid complex at the archaeological site. The group disperses and everyone goes for a walk around the site and takes pictures amidst the crowd of tourists visiting the ruins.

A local guide comments on the history of the pre-Hispanic ruins. The shaman and his wife follow carefully. The guide briefly recounts the history of the site, referring to mythology to explain the function of the jaguar temple which was used as a place of initiation for warriors who inflicted ritual mutilations of all kinds on themselves (perforation of the tongue, nostrils, genitals, skin lacerations). During this initiation, in order to increase their limits and prove their endurance, they were locked up for forty days in the temple with very little food and water at their disposal. Continuing his account, he talks about the role that Malinalco played in the past and still plays today as a site rich in energy and power, attracting an enormous flow of people, especially during the spring solstice and the autumn equinox.

The archaeological site is crowded; most of the people are Mexican tourists on holiday. There are families with their children, teenagers, couples and a group of young people who are so noisy that they blot

out the guide's voice, but he does not lose his rhythm despite the swelling noise. After giving the young troublemakers yet another look of disapproval, the shaman finally intervenes to reprimand them, telling them to be quiet, but more importantly, asking them to pay attention to the story and its importance. After the explanation, we hear the sound of a *caracol*: someone is performing at the top of the main square pyramid.

The Bādi chats with the guide and climbs to the top of the pyramid. There he opens his bag and pulls out his shamanic drum, a small mat to be laid on the ground, on which he places an incense holder, *maracas*, a *caracol* and advertising *brochures*. Then he begins to tell the story of Malinalco which is quite similar to the one the guide was telling, and he accompanies his words with songs and the beat of his drum.

A group of about thirty people listen attentively. The man suggests that they form a circle, join hands, and he invites the people who usually play to come and perform at the centre. After having performed greetings in the direction of the four cardinal points and toward the earth and sky, he resumes the explanations concerning the site. This time we are witnessing a new version of the Malinalco ruins' use. The bloody initiation of future warriors becomes a metaphor of pushing people into a positive struggle, a struggle that is not aimed at killing, but at achieving personal goals. He goes on to explain the importance of the eagle and the jaguar. And before starting to play the drum, he says a few words in Otomi. Other people have climbed to the top of the pyramid and the circle widens. Two stout young men who play the *caracol* are invited. The scene, which takes place against the blue of the horizon, brings together about fifty people holding hands to form a circle with *Bādi* dressed in white in the centre playing the drum with his eyes closed and facing the sky. Four other people play the *caracol*. One of them is Lourdes, the Mexican nurse who participates in the course. She is also dressed in white and takes on the role of assistant. Meanwhile, the shaman's wife spreads incense smoke all around, and the incense is then burned in a small ceramic bowl. The group attracts other curious people who approach. Still playing the drum, the Mexican man continues his explanation of the world, of energy, of a personal struggle, of the defence of Mother Earth, and of the importance of nature.

As Gutiérrez Zúñiga (2008) puts it when analysing neo-traditional dances: "Mexico is represented in this conception as a spiritual

centre within a global planetary context. Even esoteric rituals of the Mexicanidad movement, such as the Dance of the Sun, not only seek to re-edit a pre-Hispanic indigenous past purified of Western elements, but are presented as sacrificial actions for the benefit of an interconnected energetic universe in crisis, a conception very typical of the New Age movement". One of the main attributes of contemporary spiritualities is their porosity and ability to incorporate any cultural and historical element in order to transform it and make it palatable in the eyes of these new seekers of the sacred. It is a de-contextualised and de-historicised sacredness that participates in a process of mythopoiesis typical of the contemporary secularized world.

The explanations are in Spanish and Otomi. Spanish, a commonly spoken language, has become, during shamanic prayers, a kind of exegetical language essential to emphasize the words and explanations in Otomi. Both languages are used simultaneously. To the ears of the many non-Otomi present in Malinalco, the acoustic scene refers to a sound gestation in which guttural and nasal sounds of the Otomi language, the beat of the drum, the muffled sound of the *caracol*, the melody of the recurring Spanish words such as *madre tierra*, *energía*, *paz*, *sanación*, *sol*, *fuerza*, and *Pacha-mama*, merge together.

The music and words continue for another half hour. Then the circle is broken and only the shaman, his wife and the *caracol* players remain at the top of the pyramid. Before the public disperses, brochures on shamanic activities are distributed. I linger a little at the top of the pyramid, attracted by another scene that takes place a few meters away from the Otomi shaman. There are two women dressed in Western style: one of them (the younger one) is lying on the rock with her eyes closed, while the second is beside her on her knees with her eyes closed. She speaks in a woman's low voice and places her hands on the woman lying down. Her hands do not touch their clothes or her body, but at times the woman's muscles contract and her body bends upwards, as if something is lifting her up.

Meanwhile, the shaman is also about to carry out healings using sound. A person in the audience stands in the centre and around him four people play the *caracol*: Lourdes, the two young men, and a third, a lady, blow vigorously on their instruments, moving from the bottom to the top to chase away the spirits. A little further away, the Bãdi plays the

drum. Thus, slowly, a circle of curious people begins to form again. The spectators timidly return to the healing practice. Everything continues quietly until the shaman's wife, who until then had been content to remain in the background, enters the sound quadrilateral.

As soon as the four people start to play in her direction, the woman, with her eyes closed, starts to emit a moan, which gradually turns into crying without tears that makes her shake from head to toe. The tourists present flock around the shamanic couple. The woman, who until now has been looking after the patient lying down with her hands, immediately runs up and starts waving her hands frantically around the shaman's body, uttering words in a low voice. At the same moment, the woman falls to her knees, still crying and then shouting, with her eyes closed, uttering incomprehensible words, among which we manage to hear *madre-tierra*, *naturaleza*, *Pacha-mama*, *dolor*, and *mundo*. For a few seconds, the *tableau vivant* at the top of the pyramid represents a sort of secret council of shamans: in the centre is the main figure lying on the ground, convulsing and crying, surrounded by the four *caracol* players who continue to blow their instruments without ever stopping. Outside the circle, the indigenous shaman sings in Spanish and Otomi, while the healer who has arrived in a hurry puts her hands on his wife's body and speaks in a low voice. The shaman's secretary (also dressed in white) holds his face in his hands with terrified features.

For several minutes, the archaeological site of Malinalco is polarised by this scene, tourists flock to feed their curiosity, but after about ten minutes, the public's interest begins to wane. The woman continues to cry and scream, her eyes closed, lying on the ground; the *caracol* musicians, exhausted, have stopped playing their instruments. Even the *curandera* dressed in Western clothing has put an end to her work, solicited by the whims of her grandson. On the pyramidal platform, there is only the woman on the ground, the shaman at her side playing his drum relentlessly, the nurse continuing to blow into the *caracol* and the secretary with a pale face placing his hands on the young woman's body so as to calm her down. All this lasts for about half an hour, then stops abruptly when they realise that at the foot of the pyramid there are only four children left who are crudely mimicking the shaman's cries.

I observe the scene from a distance while taking notes: at the top of the pyramid there are the three figures dressed in white who accompany

the cries of the woman lying on the ground with their instruments. At the same time, the laughter of the four children at the foot of the pyramid can be heard more and more. At a certain point, the drums and the caracol fall silent. The four people look around. Overlooking the foot of the pyramid, they see the children bent over laughing. The four adults pull themselves together and then come back down.

A site-keeper approaches me. When we start talking he tells me that he has never heard of the Otomi shaman; this is the first time he has seen him in Malinalco. He finds it unusual, to say the least, that he should be allowed to play at the top of the pyramid because there is a regulation prohibiting this kind of activity at archaeological sites. According to my interlocutor, we have witnessed the scene of a tourist attraction because the main religion in Mexico is Catholicism. Thus, when we need to pray, we go to church and not to an archaeological site. The “show” (that’s how he defines it) of the lady at the top of the pyramid did not surprise him. There are often such spectacles in Malinalco, especially around the spring equinox.

The man who describes what happened at the top of the pyramid at the archaeological site of Malinalco as a “show” illustrates the extent to which indigenous cosmologies are constantly reworked by the natives themselves and placed at the service of the thriving market of esoteric merchandise that is once again part of the complicated relationship of colonial powers governing relations between the Old and New Worlds (Caicedo, 2007). The theme of the transformation of indigenous ontologies into commodities (Appadurai, 1986) for contemporary Western pilgrims fully opens up the discussion of what it means to be a shaman and the different attributions of this function depending on the various subjects that contribute to the construction of this precise epistemological category. If in these pages we show how a neo-shaman—who is defined as a shaman by his followers—behaves, it is important briefly to outline the characteristics of a shaman as defined by scholars who have studied the subject focussing specifically on Mexico. We refer to the definition Dow (1998) provides in his analysis of shamans in the context of Mexican culture. To summarize, the anthropologist points out some basic elements that define a shaman.

One simple way of defining shamans is by what they do. In general, shamans are healers who specialize in symbolic healing, in the effects of the mind on the body. The primary tool of

Mexican shamans is magical ritual. However not every magical healer in Mexico is a shaman. There are magical healers, such as spiritualists and psychic surgeons, whose work is not part of a native tradition and, hence, they are not called shamans. In Mexico, shaman designates a magical healer who works within a modern Native American cultural tradition. Another common means of defining shamans in Mexico is by the way in which they receive their power to cure. Madsen (1955: 48) defines a shaman as an individual who has received the power to cure directly from supernatural beings through dreams, visions, or spirit possession. Not all the native cultures of Central and North Mexico support the same type of shaman. A cursory analysis had led me to propose two types: a traditional type and a curandero type.

Traditional shamans base their work on a coherent non-Christian religious belief system. They work with traditional myths that have pre-Columbian connections. The traditional shaman is a religious leader and may be graded with others in a hierarchy of spiritual attainment.

Curandero shamans practice magical healing without the authority and prestige of being religious leaders in their communities. They draw on a wide range of folk belief including colonial Spanish and modern rural beliefs.

Shamanism is simply based on the laws of nature as Native Americans see them. This traditional worldview is fundamentally animistic. In the native worldview, no distinction is made between symbolic and physical effects or between psychological and medicinal causality. In the eastern part of central Mexico, Sierra Nāhñu (Otomi) go on pilgrimages to a mythic place called "México Chiquito," or "Mayonikha" (Galinier, 1990: 313). In fact, there are a number of cave shrines in the sacred mountains of this area that can serve as the mythic locus. The difference between a pilgrimage and a trip to a mountain shrine is simply in the length of the preparation and the length of the journey. Mayonikha refers to the place of an ancient church or a dual church (Galinier, 1990: 313). Since the original Tenochtitlán (México) contained the main Aztec dual temple, the idea of México Chiquito (Little México) as a place of pilgrimage recapitulates a pilgrimage to the Aztec dual temple at Tenochtitlán. The memory of ancient Mexico City as a place of pilgrimage still lingers on in the Sierra Nāhñu vocabulary" (Dow, 1998: 1-19).

An almost fatal hike

As the days go by, a hike in the mountains at more than 3,000 metres above sea level is planned. The night before, the shaman asks the group to prepare carefully for the next day: it will be a long, cold day. We will go to the high mountains, to a secret, sacred place for the Otomi

people. Once at the top, we are supposed to perform special rituals to communicate with the great spirit of the sacred mountain.

Pilgrimages to shrines hidden in the vegetation are still part of the Otomi tradition “*la costumbre*”, as was the case with the pilgrimage to the ruins of *Màyónjã* or *México Chiquito* in which I took part with other anthropologists at Easter 2010 (Maessig, Pérez, Huber & Garret, 2012). It is important to remember that this Mesoamerican population, as Soustelle reveals, was defined as mountain people “*gente serrana*”.

The Otomi, properly speaking, are the highest altitude inhabitants of Mexico. They are typical mountain people, and it is enough to glance at the literature of the time of the conquest to see that this reputation had long been theirs. Torquemada calls them “*gente serrana*” (Torquemada, *Fr. Juan de- Veinte i un libros rituales i monarchia indiana. 3 vols. Madrid 1723*) and states that the majority of them inhabit the mountains. According to Motolinia, all the mountains around Mexico City are populated by them. In Ixtlilxochitl’s *Historia Chichimeca*, the Otomi who save the life of King Netzahualcoyotl, appear as the masters of the mountain, where they hide him in a “*puesto muy oculto, fragoso, y peñascoco*”. The Aztecs and the Nahuatl of the Valley of Mexico knew that it was enough to penetrate the wooded chains that separate this valley from that of Toluca to find oneself in the midst of the Otomis. This has not changed. At the end of a quarter of an hour by rail, on the line from Mexico City to Toluca, one arrives at the station of San Bartolito, where the Otomi territory begins, covering the whole range and extending to the gates of Toluca. Altitudes above 3,000 m in Mexico (3,867 in Popocatepetl) are not uncommon. Their resistance to the freezing nights and to the breathlessness caused by the elevation seems perfect, resulting from a very long adaptation. It is known that in Mexico it is usual to distinguish three regions or “stages” according to elevation: the Hot Lands (*Tierras Calientes*), the Temperate Lands (*Tierras Templadas*) and the Cold Lands (*Tierras Frias*). The vast majority of the Otomis-Pames inhabit the Cold Lands; a small number inhabit the Temperate Lands. No representatives of the family are found in the warm lands (Soustelle, 1937: 13-14).

The next morning, after about an hour’s wait, the journey begins in the minibus. We travel for more than an hour, leave Toluca and climb up the side of a mountain. The weather changes and the sunny sky gives way to threatening grey clouds. The minibus stops in front of a sign indicating the destination *El Parque del Nevado de Toluca*. We walk on, the rain soon turns to snow. The shaman walks at a fast pace at the head of the group. The women follow him with difficulty. After a few

kilometres of walking, we arrive at the entrance of the park, where there is a hut with some guards and drinks for sale. The shaman, excited, describes the day's programme, which consists of walking to the top of the *Nevado*, where there is the crater of an extinct volcano which, over the millennia, has given way to two lagoons, *El Sol* and *La Luna*. As the man enthusiastically encourages us to admire the arid, mountainous landscape, we notice that one of the women, Claude, is missing. She limps in, staggering. She eventually joins the group, but she is clearly in trouble. Her face is pale and she is breathing heavily. Her chest hurts and she finds it difficult to speak. The shaman continues the walk. Jeanne and I decide to stop at the hut with Claude, who obviously can't go any further. We are at 3,600 meters of altitude and an eloquent sign from the Mexican government warns against the dangers of the high mountains, advising us to come down at the slightest symptom of altitude sickness: *mareo, dolor de cabeza, somnolencia, dificultad al respirar...* (Figure 5) Claude wants to go home, and asks the shaman's father-in-law if she can't be taken home. The driver, embarrassed, replies that it would be better to wait for the shaman with the other members of the group, and then leave together. Claude, resigned, says that this is certainly an important test for her and that she must find the strength to overcome it. She tries to concentrate on her breathing, to stay focused on herself. She says that there are Indian yogi masters who succeed through their discipline in slowing down the heartbeat until it stops, by sheer force of will. She sits and breathes, trying to find a more appropriate rhythm. An hour passes and the man comes down with the other four women. Aurélie is excited; she talks about the beauty of the lagoons, the masculine and feminine energy she felt in the depths of her being, the vibrations of the drum that beat in unison with her heart.

In contact with the water, they played the drums to summon the spirits of the place who manifested themselves, with an unexpected reflection of the sun's rays that suddenly broke through the clouds, adorning the two lagoons with an emerald green colour. The other women agreed on the energy and beauty of the place, but were physically very tired and wanted to return home as soon as possible.

It has started raining, and once we arrive at the Universidad Indígena, the only distraction left is to wander from room to room chatting.

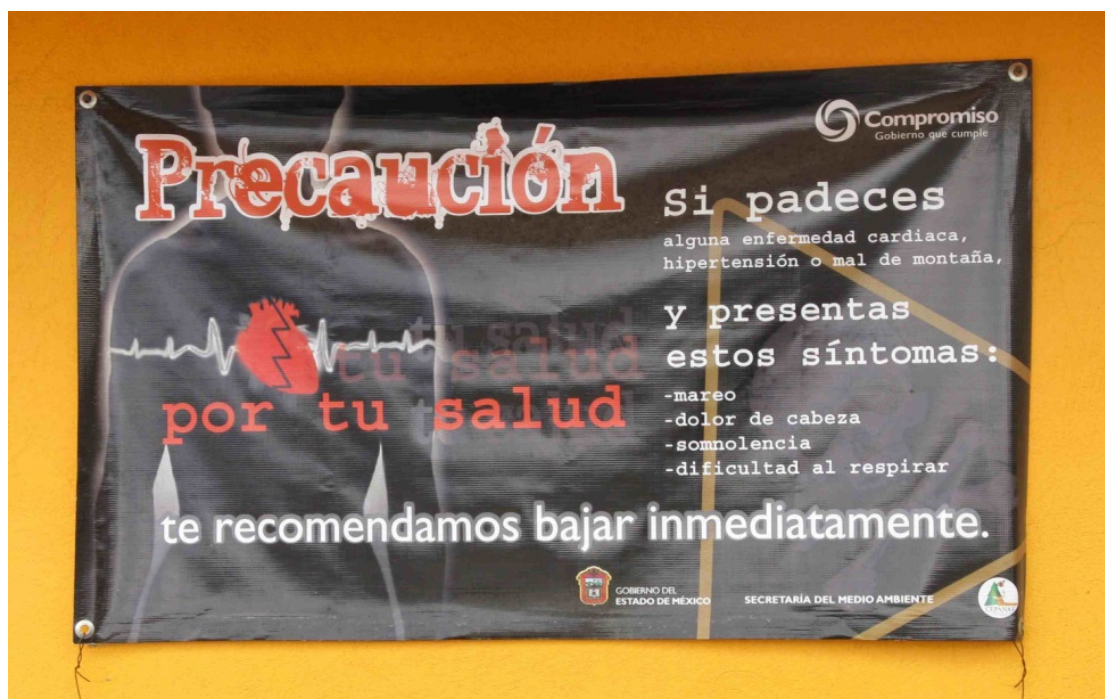


Figure 5: Nevado Toluca. Source: Denise Lombardi.

Claude has regained her colour and her breathing is back to normal. She confides that she had felt very nauseous when doing yoga at 3,600 metres and was afraid of losing consciousness. Jeanne admits that she is a little disappointed not to have participated in the ritual. She says that this non-experience is strongly linked to her karma, her destiny. She has spent most of her life looking after her younger sister, who is in poor health, despite the fact that they were only 13 months apart. The woman is distraught as she thinks back on the story of her family and her sick sister, then suddenly becomes angry, saying between tears: “I wanted to live my life! It wasn’t me who should have had to take care of her, it should have been our parents. She was my sister, not my daughter!” Claude thanks her for her sacrifice and admits that the day has been a great lesson for everyone. Sylvie and Louise are rather perplexed by the behaviour of the shaman and the danger Claude seems to have been in. They say to themselves that, without doubt, the *Bādi*’s power is measured by what happened during the day: the shaman had planned everything and surely knew that nothing serious would happen. Claude does not answer. Jeanne doesn’t question the shaman’s power, but in her opinion, he should be much more careful with people and especially should have a first aid kit, in case someone feels really ill... but still...

Toluca and the initiatory walk

The Mexican trip ends with a blindfolded initiation walk on the last day. The objective is to reach the top of a steep mountain behind the city of Toluca (Lombardi, 2012).

In groups of two, the participants advance holding hands, respecting the rhythm of their companion and helping each other. The only useful external reference point to overcome this challenge is to listen to the sound of the drum of the shaman who guides the group. The duos cannot communicate with each other, the route must be done in silence, using only audition and touch to move forward. I do the exercise like the others, in a duo with Paul, the shaman's secretary. After trying to walk together in an upright position, we both understand that the best strategy is to walk on all fours in the middle of the brush, on the stones and the cacti, continuing to hold hands. After a certain amount of time, the duration of which is impossible to estimate, Paul lets go of my hand. I look for him as I fumble around in the hot afternoon air; I hear a thud like that of a falling body and then I hear a gasp. Scared, I take off the blindfold and see the young man lying on the ground. I approach him while calling the *Bādi* and the group stops.

The scene is a remarkable one: this group of European women, on mountains over 3,000 metres high, surrounding the Mexican town of Toluca, in the heat of a March afternoon in 2009, watching stunned and terrified as a young man is in the throes of a severe convulsion. He is very pale, lying on the rocks after a painful fall. We can only see the whites of his eyes. His forehead is covered with cold sweat; his body, all stiff, is covered with tremors to such an extent that we have to hold him tightly to prevent him from rolling down the slope. A large trickle of saliva flows down his neck, he groans faintly and does not respond to our calls.

The women try to revive him with small slaps. They call him by his real name and then by his shamanic name. They open his mouth to allow him to breathe and prevent him from suffocating while the Mexican shaman sings in the Otomi language and pounds insistently on the drum to chase away the spirits and allow the young man's soul to return to his body. The minutes seem interminable. The women wonder if it would not be better to call for help: the police, the fire brigade, the hospital? While the man continues to grumble in the bush, all the Western rescue hypotheses are reviewed but they are immediately discarded: on the one

hand, we are several hours away from the nearest urban centre; and on the other hand, we know nothing about Mexican protocol in such a situation.

As for the shaman, he does not seem the least bit worried and continues to bang his drum and sing. After about ten minutes, the moaning and convulsions subside and the young man regains consciousness. He stops shaking, his face regains colour and those of the participants do the same. Slowly, everything returns to normal. In the meantime, the still-frightened women cry and hug the shaman, all moved, and in the midst of their tears, the words that recur most often are “letting go”, “power”, “love”, “nature”, “strength” and “shamanic initiation”. When Paul has fully recovered, he will say that he has been visited by the spirits and will bless the manifestation of the power and the medical art of the shaman.

Still visibly shaken by the events of the day, the women reiterate their thanks to the shaman for his strength, power, and composure. The young man also confirms that without his help, the day really could have gone very wrong. Only Lourdes, the Mexican nurse, will tell me (without the other members of the group being able to hear her): “I think it was some kind of epileptic seizure, not too serious, but probably an epileptic seizure. I imagine he knows this and takes medication regularly”.

The journey is coming to an end. During the mountain experience, the women will regain their belief in shamanic efficiency and confirm the power and energy of the shaman. Until then, the women had been constantly animated by contradictory feelings: on the one hand, fascinated by the places visited and the experiences offered; on the other hand, angry and annoyed by the conditions that had been reserved for them. The poor organization, the excessively uncomfortable accommodation, the often unusable bathrooms, the lack of water for washing, and the monotonous nature of the meals, which were not very substantial or plentiful, had ended up exasperating them. Doubts about the value for money of the journey, the shaman’s ambiguous and incomprehensible attitude towards his own people by which one could then legitimately wonder what *Bādī*’s true position was towards his fellow countrymen. Doubts persisted. The test will only come to an end on the initiatory path of the last day when the women, after their great fright, will revisit their feelings and give the shaman a warm embrace.

Conclusion

As Turner and Turner state (1978), “Pilgrimage *lives* in Mexico. Millions of people every year journey to near or distant shrines, some of which date almost from Cortés’s conquest, others from the latest rumored miracle” as is the case with Our Lady of Guadalupe, a Marian shrine that welcomes millions of faithful from all over Central and South America every year. The statue of the “Virgencita” is part of one of the founding myths of the Mexican megalopolis; its history is intertwined with that of Hernan Cortés, Christopher Columbus, Bishop Leander of Seville and Pope Saint Gregory the Great, and its discovery echoes the shepherd cycles, typical of Christian tradition, which see the figure of the poor, amazed shepherd as the person entrusted with perceiving Marian visions and transmitting them to the whole world. The apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe are always linked to miracles to support their veracity. Mexican history, as Turner and Turner (1978: 40-103) show, is punctuated by pilgrimages to places considered sacred and miraculous by pre-Hispanic populations. We can consider the journey of the French women as a pilgrimage with the body of the shaman as its building, its temple. But at the same time, it takes the physical presence of the Mexican archaeology to preserve elements of reference that will serve to construct the mythopoetic narrative to be resolved with the miraculous “healing” of the shaman’s assistant on the last day of the pilgrimage. In the apparently secular perspective that contemporary spiritualities share, we observe how the reference model still remains that of the Catholic pilgrimage with a final epiphany that resolves the many doubts of the participants.

This type of spiritual tourism that we have looked at in this paper can be considered an example of the contemporary transformation of religious needs. It demonstrates a spirituality characterized by the search for oneself and one’s physical and spiritual well-being that needs an exotic and distant “elsewhere” to make itself evident to people. The neo-shaman uses contemporary means to tell a virtual story capable of creating new ephemeral communities that move around following their favourite shaman. Neo-Shamanism is integrated into economic logics determined by the laws of competition that characterize the contemporaneity of a world market, in terms of economic exchanges, and shamanic journeys have been transformed from a journey towards

the supernatural to seek answers in the celestial or chthonic world into a journey to spread “ancestral wisdom” from the South to the North of the world. We are faced with a pilgrimage in reverse: it is not only the pilgrims who physically travel to places of worship. It is the shaman’s body that is constituted as a place of worship and adoration (Lombardi, 2009). A body that moves towards his devotees, in a continuous movement of bodies, beliefs, and symbols and where the historical monuments become indispensable to the narrative necessary for this new spiritual conquest made by the New World against the Old. The whole journey will be studded with doubts, uncertainties, opacities but at the same time it will be the moments of collective sharing and an ability to “feel the energies” thanks to the intercession of the shaman that will make it a collective experience and not just an individual journey. As is often the case in ritual practices that characterize contemporary spiritualities, we see how an experience such as a pilgrimage to an ‘exotic’ country like Mexico requires important ritual orchestration of the expression of emotions through the constitution of a small collective of strangers. Throughout the journey, this group is located outside their ordinary lives and constantly experiences idiosyncratic and contradictory emotions and experiences that are indispensable for the realisation of a shared emotional experience of exceptional intensity (Moisseff & Houseman 2020)

It will only be at the end of the journey that, in a moment of collective sharing, they will thank him for having helped them to find each other again. Each of them, thanks to the Mexican journey, had made (they said) a real journey back in time, necessary to return to their childhood. This metaphorical movement was lived as an essential element to untie their most intimate emotional geographical or personal, and the shaman was the one who had allowed the link between these two usually separate dimensions. Going to discover the origins of Mexican shamanism allowed them (in their eyes) to go and meet their childlike self, that is to say, to return to their emotional past and soothe it thanks to the prodigious actions of the shaman who, in spite of initial doubts, had obtained the confidence of five women in discovering themselves rather than the Mexican remains.

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Notes

¹ In this paper I will use the formula shaman and neo-shaman indiscriminately to define the Mexican man of Otomi culture who calls himself a shaman.

² This is only a brief sampling of the wide variety of practices included in this category.

³ It should be pointed out that trips of this kind to discover shamanic origins are different from those related to mystical or shamanic tourism to the Colombian and Peruvian Amazon, which involves taking psychotropics such as ayahuasca (Losonczy & Mesturini, 2010; Amselle, 2013).

⁴ The Otomi are part of the Otomanguan group and the Otomi-Pame linguistic family, which in turn is divided into two groups: the Otomi, Mazahua, Matlatzinca and Ocuiltecan on the one hand, and the Pame and Chichimeco-Jonaz on the other. The Otomi are among the oldest sedentary settlers who remained in the Central Plateau. The Otomi settled in various regions of the Central Altiplano: around the Nevado de Toluca, the North of Toluca, in the Province of Xillotepec, Tula, Sierra de las Cruces (Quauhtlalpan), the North of the Valley of Mexico (Teotlalpan), the Mezquital Valley, Metztitlan and Acolhuacan. The Otomi are of very ancient origin and were related to the Olmecs of Nonoalco and the Penome Chocho-Popolocas of the Altiplano. The Otomi culture was modified by the influence of the Toltecs with elements of the northern hunters. This was the century of the Otomi's most important heyday (Ramirez, 2009: 9).

⁵ All names of persons mentioned in the text have been changed.

⁶ The teenager was 16 years old, she was pregnant and a bit confused. The trip to Mexico was intended to help the girl at this particular time in her life.

⁷ The *caracol* is a musical instrument that produces a low and prolonged sound, similar to that of a horn. The *caracol* has been considered an object of primary importance in Mexico since pre-Hispanic times. In the pictorial manuscripts of the Mixteca region, the *caracol* is presented as a sacred object, worn during the processions that preceded the enthronement of a new leader or governor. The *caracol* was also part of the sumptuous representations of certain supernatural beings, such as the Yahui, which in Oaxacan iconography appeared as a figure with a tortoise shell on its back, a trapezoid-pointed tail, and eagle claws. In the cosmovision of the Otomi groups, from which the Otomi were derived, this supernatural being was a powerful Nahual who was transformed into a ball of fire that could fly (Rivera Guzmán & Malbrán Porto, 2003-2006: 47-67).

⁸ The *sahumerio* is an object used throughout Central America. It is a kind of painted ceramic cup, 30 cm high, inside which there are embers where pieces of copal or other incense burn. In the Otomi tradition, the *sahumerio* is one of the typical attributes of the shaman. In the representation of the cut-out card characters called *N'Zaki*, the figure corresponding to the shaman appears with the *sahumerio* on his head.

⁹ The physical perception of energy also offers a proof of the existence of the divine, because energy is interpreted in this context as the manifestation of an immanent divine force that allows and sustains life. Through the reference to

energy the divine passes from the domain of transcendence to immanence, from the domain of faith to that of experience (Fedele, 2013: 88).

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*La peregrinación de turistas espirituales franceses a la fuente del neo-
chamanismo mexicano:
un puente internacional (e intercontinental)*

Resumen: En este artículo, analizaremos un viaje dedicado al descubrimiento de las “fuentes del conocimiento indígena” emprendido en marzo de 2009 por franceses en un país desconocido para ellos: México. Más concretamente, examinaremos sus formas de participación en este viaje organizado por un chamán de origen otomí llamado por sus seguidores con el término vernáculo de Bădi, es decir, “el chamán” en lengua otomí. El objetivo de este viaje es permitirles descubrir los orígenes del chamanismo, que el organizador vincula con la historia de los pueblos indígenas. Además de la visita a los sitios arqueológicos prehispánicos, el viaje también incluye una visita al país otomí, que se presenta como uno de los centros del chamanismo mexicano.

Palabras clave: Neochamanismo; Turismo espiritual; Otomí; México; Espiritualidades contemporáneas

*A peregrinação de turistas espirituais franceses às fontes do
neoxamanismo mexicano:
uma ponte internacional (e intercontinental)*

Resumo: Neste artigo, analisaremos uma jornada dedicada à descoberta das “fontes do conhecimento indígena” empreendida em março de 2009 por franceses em um país até então desconhecido por eles: o México. Mais especificamente, examinaremos suas formas de participação nessa jornada organizada por um xamã de origem otomi, chamado por seus seguidores pelo termo vernáculo Bădi, ou seja, “o xamã” na língua otomi. O objetivo dessa viagem é permitir que eles descubram as origens do xamanismo, que o organizador vincula à história dos povos indígenas. Além de visitar sítios arqueológicos pré-hispânicos, a viagem também inclui uma visita ao país Otomi, que é apresentado como um dos centros do xamanismo mexicano.

Palavras-chave: Neoxamanismo; Turismo espiritual; Otomi; México; Espiritualidades contemporâneas